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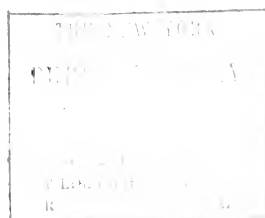
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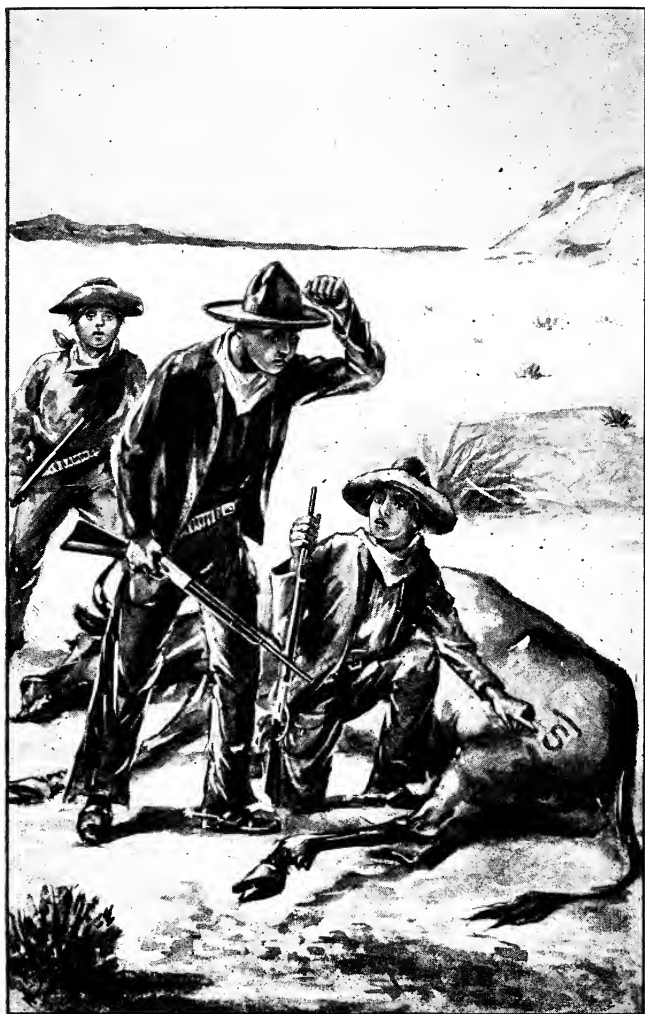
CHEBRONCHO RIDER
BOYS
on the WYOMING TRAIL

FRANK FOWLER

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Plainly branded on the flank of the dead animal was the sign
manual, a bar, and the letter S. Page 43.
The Broncho Rider Boys on the Wyoming Trail

The Broncho Rider Boys On the Wyoming Trail

OR

A Mystery of the Prairie Stampede

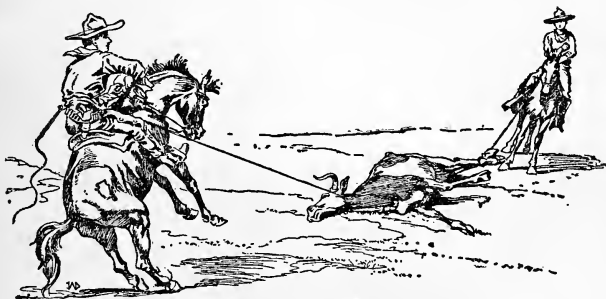
By FRANK FOWLER

Author of

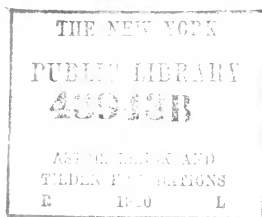
"The Broncho Rider Boys Down in Arizona,"

"The Broncho Rider Boys at Keystone Ranch,"

"The Bronco Rider Boys Along the Border,"



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THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS
ON THE WYOMING TRAIL

THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS ON THE WYOMING TRAIL

CHAPTER I.

ALONG THE WYOMING TRAIL.

"GETTING near the end of our long ride, ain't we, Adrian?"

"Another night out ought to finish our great gallop from the Arizona border away up into the Wyoming cattle country, Billie."

"Huh! mebbe I ain't just glad to hear that news now. This broncho riding business may be all very well for a while; but a fellow can get too much, even of a good thing; ain't that so, Donald?"

"I've found that out myself many a time, and 'specially around the Christmas stuffing season, Billie. But you'll admit that our horses have held out well. Wireless is about as willing as when we started from my home weeks back."

"That's right, and so is Jupiter here, which is a

wonder, considering that I'm nearly as heavy as my two saddle chums combined. Time was when Jupiter kept me guessing which way he had made up his mind to throw me off; but he don't act like a crazy thing any more."

"No, you cured him of that trick, all right, Billie, though we thought he'd break that stubborn neck of yours in the bargain," laughed the boy called Adrian.

"And you stick to the saddle like a burr these days, because you can ride just as well as—well, you can eat, which is going some, if I do say it," went on the third of the young riders, whom the fat boy had called Donald.

Billie laughed merrily, showing that he was a good-natured chap, and could take a joke, even when it was on himself, which is more than some lads are able to do, the more the pity.

While they plod on in this way, heading toward a group of houses where they hoped to find a way-side tavern at which they might secure some sort of a lunch, for they did not wish to stop to do any cooking at noon, we may as well take advantage of the opportunity to introduce these three lively boys to those readers who may not have had the good fortune to meet them before in earlier volumes of this Western series of books.

Donald Mackay was the son of a well-to-do ranchman located down along the Arizona border, where he carried on his cattle business at Keystone Ranch;

and was at the same time heavily interested in certain copper mines situated among the mountains.

Adrian Sherwood was a friend, and a chum of Donald's, who had spent a long stretch with the Mackays, so that he almost looked upon their home as his own. He was an orphan, and owned a cattle ranch of his own up here in Wyoming, which had for a long time been managed by his Uncle Fred Comstock; but which the young fellow had not visited for a term of years, ever since meeting Donald, in fact.

During the last twelve months or so he had been receiving very disappointing returns from his property. All sorts of evil things had apparently swooped down on the valuable ranch, which had once been known under another name, but now went by that of the Bar-S outfit.

Adrian had bothered very little about it at first, but as these bad returns continued, his curiosity was aroused; and finally he found himself tempted to visit his property secretly, without warning his uncle of his coming. In this way he hoped to see for himself just what strange things were taking place up here in what was once the finest cattle country, barring none, in all the Wild West.

The third member of the trio of riders was named William Stonewall Jackson Winkle. Hence it would go without saying that he came of an intensely patriotic Southern family, one or more of

whose members must have ridden with the famous Confederate general in those terrible days of the Civil War; though the Winkles now lived in the North, and Billie's father was a rich New York lawyer.

The boy had really been sent to pay a year's visit to his cousin, Donald, in the hope that the bracing air and breezy life of a cattle ranch, with plenty of outdoor exercise thrown in might reduce his flesh more or less; and the cure had been fairly successful.

While Billie was still an enormously fat chap, his muscles were no longer flabby, but "hard as nails," as he often joyously avowed. He had come out West a genuine tenderfoot or greenhorn, only knowing how to ride fairly well; but gifted with an extraordinary stubborn disposition that forced him to keep "plugging" away at any thing he wished to learn until it *had* to succumb.

So he had conquered the vicious pony named Jupiter, which none of the cow-punchers had had the patience to break of his evil ways. For a long time it was an open question whether Billie would break the pony, or the latter break Billie's neck; but in the end the determined boy had won out. And from that day on they delighted to call the fat chum Broncho Billie.

Down in Arizona these three lads, known far and wide as the Broncho Rider Boys because they were

nearly always seen galloping swiftly over the plains on their mounts, either in pursuit of game, runaway cattle, or just for a wild lark, had of course met with numerous exciting experiences.

Some of these will be found narrated in previous volumes of this series, to which the reader who would know more about the saddle pards, is referred.

They had made the journey of hundreds of miles mounted on their horses, and taking things rather easy. With them they carried rifles, and some cooking utensils as well as blankets; for many a night they camped just as they found themselves in the open, making themselves fairly comfortable. At other times they put up at roadside taverns, especially when a bad spell of weather came along, and the chance for shelter offered.

From what Adrian had said to the stout chum, they were now close to the end of their long journey, with their mounts in tiptop condition. Indeed, he had assured Billie that this night would in all probability be their last on the Wyoming trail, as they should reach Bar-S Ranch before another sundown succeeded the one that was before them.

Billie liked riding, but being such a heavy fellow he longed for a change. To his mind a few days spent in lying around and taking things easy would be a delight. At times he joked, and told his chums that if they kept him on the jump much longer he would be able to get a job in some dime museum as

the Living Skeleton; but somehow this doleful information did not appear to cause either Adrian or Donald any alarm. They would look him over critically, and then grin, as they shook their heads in the negative, as though unable to detect any difference in his heft nowadays from what it used to be when they left Keystone Ranch.

In this way they rode in among the houses that formed a prairie village. Farms doubtless lay scattered around, with the owners preferring to live in a community, and ride out to their work every day, either in wagons, or the latest thing in automobiles, which were already becoming very common on the plains.

Seeing an awkward, half-grown boy, who looked as though he might be connected with the tavern in front of which they had halted, Adrian called out to him.

"We want to stop over and get some lunch; can you have our ponies fed, and then brought around to the hitching fence again, after being watered?"

"Reckon I kin, boss," replied the boy, who was a rather silly looking fellow, Billie thought, and who kept staring at him so hard that he rather fancied he had never before set eyes on so stout a youth; he even grinned and chuckled while taking the bridle reins of the three ponies, and continued to stare at Billie until the three travelers had disappeared in the tap-room of the tavern.

"Seems like you made a hit with that fellow, Billie," remarked Donald, chuckling.

"Well, I ain't proud of my conquest," muttered the fat boy, who had not felt easy under the bold stare of the hostler; "he hain't got the sweetest face I ever set eyes on; and 'peared to me he might be close to a fool."

"Here's the landlord," remarked Adrian, and turning to the tall man who came bustling forward, he continued: "We'd like to have something warm to eat, if you can give it to us in a short while; your stable boy has taken our ponies around to bait and water. Are we in time for dinner?"

"Be ready in ten minutes, and glad to hev you along with us," replied the other.

They found that the dinner, while limited in variety, was very good, and with an abundance that pleased Billie especially, for the fat chum was a great eater.

Having satisfied their appetites Donald and Adrian gave Billie a little extra time. They recognized the fact that he had to eat for nearly twice their weight; and had only one set of jaws with which to do the masticating, as Billie often complained, when they reproached him for lingering over the spread.

But finally even he had to confess that he could devour no more, though he did shake his head when leaving the table, as though it was against his prin-

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ciples to allow so much to remain after he had dined.

The horses were already fastened at the rail out at the front door, and having settled for the accommodation, besides leaving a generous tip for the hostler who did not appear to be around, they mounted and rode off; at least Donald and Adrian did without any trouble.

Billie, however, was not so fortunate. Jupiter acted very queer, after having had his wild spirit so well brought under subjection by his young master long ago. He shook his head, and snorted, as though afraid of something, even prancing hither and thither as if unwilling to let Billie get into his saddle.

"Whoa! you silly thing!" shouted the fat boy, with a foot in the stirrup; and then, seeing that Jupiter was bound to make him try his best to mount this time, Billie suddenly threw himself upward, and as his other leg passed over the saddle he found himself seated.

Hardly had he done so than Jupiter commenced a series of prancings and buckings of the same type as of old, evidently objecting strenuously to Billie's weight. Not being able to dismount his young master in this way the really frantic pony suddenly dashed furiously along, passing both the others like a shot. And Billie, as he left the village tavern in the lurch, believed he heard a discordant shriek

of boyish laughter that, it struck him, must have come from the throat of the ugly stable boy who had stared so hard at him and grinned like an ape!

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGE ACTIONS OF JUPITER.

"HELLO! what ails Billie and his mount now?" burst out Adrian, as the fat chum went flying past, with Jupiter acting like a crazy thing, stopping short every little while to "buck," and leap, and dance wildly, after which he would go off again like the wind.

They started their own bronchos along at a lively pace in order to keep Billie in sight, at least.

"Looks like Jupiter might have suddenly gone back to his old ways again," remarked Donald; "and I don't know that I ever saw him carry on just like that, even when he used to give every broncho-buster on the range the time of his life trying to break him in."

"But Billie sticks like glue!" declared Adrian; "look at him, would you, when the pony nearly stands on his silly head? If Billie never did another thing he's shown us that he comes of a race of riders, that's sure. Chances are that boy at the stable

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wondered how such a fat fellow ever could keep in his saddle when on a lively broncho."

Donald made no reply. Perhaps these words had set him to thinking; or it might be he was so taken up with watching the frantic evolutions of the runaway pony just then that he could not spare the time for talking.

Meanwhile Billie was having what he would call a "warm session" with his mount. He tried to soothe Jupiter with caressing words, but for a wonder they seemed to have no effect; for if anything the beast only acted uglier than before.

Discovering this Billie changed his tactics. Believing that it was only a return of Jupiter's old vicious nature, he was now determined to give him a treatment similar to those that had in the past proved so salutary.

"Well, if you just feel like you *must* go and run away with me," he muttered between his set teeth, "I'll help things along the best I know how. I'll try and give you something to run for, you crazy thing!"

With that he brought his quirt down upon the flank of the pony with decided emphasis. As a rule he seldom had need to let Jupiter feel the sting of the lash, as the animal was a "willing goer," and ready to "break his heart" as Billie said, in carrying that heavy weight along as rapidly as the others could gallop.

Of course when he felt the cut of the quirt, brought down with all the vigor of Billie's stout arm, the pony no longer stopped to try and unseat his rider. He seemed to know that that was no longer possible; and accordingly he went dashing off at a mad pace that would necessitate the other chums urging their mounts on to do their level best, unless they wished to be distanced in the race.

So they went careering madly over the level prairie, with Billie leading, far in the van. The others managed to keep close enough together to exchange occasional remarks; and as they were constantly growing more curious concerning this strange freak of the broncho, it can be understood that they did more or less talking.

"You don't think Billie can be at fault in any way for this sudden outbreak, do you, Donald?" Adrian queried.

"I don't see how he could," came the reply. "The horse was acting mighty queer when our pard first laid hands on the saddle. I noticed him jump just like he used to in the old days. Seems like he might have had a sudden return of that crazy spirit. The boys used to say it'd come back to him some day or other, and warned Billie never to fully trust Jupiter."

"But the broncho has been acting more than half-way decent for a long time now," Adrian went on to say, as he galloped swiftly along, keeping a wary

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eye out for gopher holes, because he did not want to take chances with a broken neck by being suddenly pitched over the head of his mount; "and I really began to believe he'd never go back on Billie, for he seemed to have grown to love his master."

"You can never tell what a broncho will do," replied Donald, with his long experience as a guide; for he was a genuine prairie boy, much of his life having been spent on a cattle ranch; in fact he was even educated at home by his mother, who had once been a very clever teacher in a Chicago high school before marrying Mr. Mackay.

"Yes, they come of a wild race, and sometimes seem to feel a touch of the old free spirit that their ancestors enjoyed when they ran wild over the plains!" Adrian called out; for they had to raise their voices while speeding along at such a pace.

Billie kept lashing his mount furiously. It was the only method whereby a stubborn spirit in a pony could be subdued. The animal is to be taught that he has a master on his back, and that he must conform to the will of the rider, whether it is to run like the wind, or pull up. The first thing a broncho-buster does is to drive this idea well into the mind of his mount by whipping him constantly until he is fain to draw up when the lines begin to pull, from utter exhaustion. And after this seed has begun to take root it is comparatively easy to make an indelible impression by starting him off again with the

quirt, and the spurs, to pull him in from time to time until the lesson is well learned, never to be forgotten.

And Billie was doing the only thing left to him by whipping his broncho, though somehow it seemed to go against the grain to do it once more, after all these long weeks of peace and docility on the part of Jupiter.

Already was the animal lathered with sweat, partly because of his tremendous exertions, but more on account of his excitement and nervous state; for those coming along in the rear were in no such condition.

An hour and more passed, with the wild ride still continuing. But Donald's keen eye detected signs that told him Jupiter was growing very tired.

"He'll get him before much longer," he asserted confidently.

"Looks to me as if the broncho might be weakening," returned his companion, critically; "you see, the long journey is apt to tell on Jupiter. For days steady we've covered a heap of miles, and the grind of carrying all that weight is sure to pull down the stoutest horse going."

"Yes," Donald continued, "there, Billie nearly pulled him in then, though when the beast commenced jumping like mad he slashed him with his quirt, and just made him run again, though it was easy to see Jupiter didn't have much heart for it."

"The end isn't far off," observed Adrian; "and since we've covered an afternoon's gallop in this hour and a half, I reckon we might as well think of halting near where he finally stops his mount."

"Sure the poor beast will need a good rest!" declared Donald; "I can't quite make up my mind what ails him. Seems like he had gone clean crazy some way or other. I've seen horses act like that when they'd been locoed; but we know our animals haven't been near any poison weed like that."

"Well, we'll soon know a little more'n we do now," argued Adrian.

"Looks like it, because Billie is going to get the upper hand pretty quick, I reckon, from the way things look," added his chum.

Both of them had been making rapid time of it since leaving that prairie village where they had eaten the last meal. Of course Jupiter had flown along at even a faster clip; but then he lost time by stopping occasionally to try some of his ancient games of bucking, so that the pursuers were able to come closer again before he took a notion, under the lashing of the busy quirt, to once more start off.

Billie had not even taken notice enough of his chums to wave a hand in their direction at any time during his furious ride. But then they could understand that easily enough, for he had to keep his attention constantly fastened upon Jupiter, lest the

curveting animal spring a sudden trick calculated to dismount his rider.

Luckily the fat boy had been very particular to always have the best of girths and other gear in connection with his riding outfit. A whole lot depends on such little things as this when trying to master the ugly spirit in one of those lively bronchos; as many a cow-puncher has learned to his sorrow when something gave way, perhaps even in the moment of his victory, and not only hurled him to the ground but spoiled all that had been thus far accomplished in regard to taming the pony.

It was plain to be seen that pure exhaustion and nothing else was causing Jupiter to give in now. He acted just as strangely as ever, but lacked the strength to hold out. And it was this fact that caused Donald to shake his head and say something to himself that undoubtedly had a bearing on the solution of the mystery, only he did not feel positive enough to communicate the same to Adrian.

But Billie had finally brought his trembling mount to a standstill. When this was accomplished the fat boy carefully threw himself to the ground, keeping a tight grip on the bridle. If Jupiter attempted to rear, or break away, he would find all that weight was as good as any anchor that could have been attached to him. He might as well have tried to move a mountain as Broncho Billie, when once he stood firmly on his two legs.

"Whatever is he doing, do you think?" demanded Adrian, as he and Donald rode forward toward the spot where their chum and his foamy mount were to be seen.

"I declare if he hasn't thrown the saddle off!" cried Donald, and there was a ring of exultation in his voice, that seemed to announce that certain dim suspicions which he had been entertaining were duly strengthened by this queer fact.

"But he can't mount again if Jupiter takes a sudden notion to bolt!" said Adrian.

"No danger of that happening, take my word for it," replied Donald.

"See here, you've guessed what all the racket is about, I just know you have," the other cried, as his suspicions were aroused by Donald's manner.

"Well, I've been thinking something for a little while now, even if I didn't say a word about the same," admitted Donald, laughing.

"And you won't tell me?" urged his comrade.

"What's the use at this late stage of the game?" replied Donald. "Give Billie a chance to let the cat out of the bag; because there he is, waving to us right now, and wanting us to hurry along."

When the two who were in the rear came galloping up a couple of minutes later it was a very red-faced and indignant chum they found there, patting the trembling Jupiter tenderly, and even caress-

ing his velvety muzzle, as though begging his pardon for all that slapping of the cruel quirt.

“But how was I to know that all the while the poor thing was in agony, with me in the saddle pressing these poisoned stickers deeper and deeper into his back? Oh! it was a cruel trick, putting this bunch of sand spurs under the saddle; and no wonder the broncho acted like he was crazy as I jumped up and down, driving the points in deeper. Poor old Jupiter, how was I to know you weren’t to blame?”

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST NEWS OF THE BAR-S RANCH.

“A MEAN trick!” echoed the indignant Adrian, “I’d like to help whip the fellow who would think it funny to inflict that torture on a poor dumb beast, not to mention having the rider run a chance of breaking his neck. Whoever d’ye think could have been guilty—oh! yes, that grinning hostler at the village tavern. It must have been him!”

“Just who it was!” said Donald, grimly, and his face told how gladly he would have taken pleasure in being one of several to treat the ugly-faced half-grown cub to a good hiding, to pay him for his detestable trick.

“He kept on looking at me all the time, and grin-

ning like a monkey," grumbled Billie, who was still caressing his broncho; and somehow Jupiter seemed to understand it was all a mistake that he received that whipping, for he whinnied, and rubbed his nose against his master's cheek.

"Yes," continued Donald, "somehow the silly thought it'd be a fine sight to see how a fellow built like Billie here is, would carry on when a horse got skittish; and like as not he couldn't think up any other way than this. I once knew a mean greaser to fasten some of these sand spurs under a horse's tail, and the game worked so that the rider was thrown; with a broken arm to show for it."

"What happened to the Mexican?" demanded Billie, eagerly.

"I never just knew," replied Donald, seriously; "but the boys took after him, and from that day to this I've never set eyes on his yellow face again. I sometimes think they must have lynched the scoundrel, though nobody would ever let on."

"Well, he sure deserved it," muttered Billie; "but say, I hope now we ain't going any further this same day. I'd like Jupiter to have some rest; and besides, I want to rub his poor blistered back here with some witch hazel, and put some salve on. When I ride to-morrow I'll see there's a good pad under my saddle, you hear me."

That was just like generous, good-hearted Billie. He would never harm any sort of domestic animal,

which accounted for his anger toward the thoughtless hostler who in order to have a little fun, and see the fat boy throw his arms around the neck of his mount, as he imagined would come to pass, had taken advantage of his opportunity to play such a wicked trick.

"Oh! we'd already decided that!" declared Adrian.

"And we stop somewhere close by, do we?" asked Billie, anxiously; "because, like as not this terrible work will give me something of an appetite, and I'll be wanting to start supper a little earlier than usual to-night—now, don't laugh, boys; I know it's hard on the rest of you that nature made me so big I have to eat for two; but I just can't help it. And that work used up all my dinner, you see."

They had long ago stopped arguing with Billie with regard to his abnormal appetite. Sometimes one or the other would joke him about it, but they never tried to cut him short on his rations.

Looking around Adrian quickly decided that they had come upon as good a place to spend this the last night on the Wyoming trail as any that could be found.

"What better could heart wish?" he put it up to them; "with this fine little watercourse running zigzag along, and right here a motte of timber where we can make our camp? And there are several riders heading toward us, that perhaps we might

try and pump, so as to get some information about the Bar-S Ranch. That landlord at the tavern didn't seem to know anything."

"Look like cowboys too," declared Billie, after an anxious glance toward those who were galloping in their direction; for Billie knew that on the plains it is hardly wise to trust any one you happen to meet until they have proved their title to be looked on as friends.

"Oh! come, don't keep feeling for your gun that is strapped so safely to your back, Billie," said Adrian, laughing. "There are only three in the bunch, and they're sure enough punchers. Let's give them the cowboy salute, and show that we happen to be of the same stripe; though I reckon our outfit tells that already."

"Yes," added Donald, "and don't forget, Billie, that we said we'd keep mum about Adrian here being the owner of the Bar-S Ranch. Just say we belong down Arizona-way, and have come up here to look around. People mind their own business generally speaking, here on the plains, and they won't pry into our affairs when they see we don't care to open up."

"All the same, I'd like to ask a few questions myself," Adrian went on to say. "It might be right useful to us if we could get a line on what's going on up around the Bar-S, before we arrived."

"A good idea," commented Billie, quickly.

"They say forewarned is forearmed, you know; and if we learn something is crooked why, you'll be able to figure on what you ought to do, eh, Ad?"

"Just what I will, Billie," replied the other, grimly; "though it's hard for me to even suspect my uncle of stealing. If you knew what a spirited little man he used to be, and what a high sense of honor he had, you'd understand that. But keep quiet about these things now, Billie, for here they come galloping up, waving their hats, and whooping like mad."

The three cow-punchers quickly pulled in when apparently about to ride the others down, and hearty salutations followed on both sides.

They were just such rough riders as may be found scattered all over the country where cattle are raised for the market, requiring a host of dashing fellows to herd them, brand the mavericks and youngsters, and keep the drove from being stolen by rustlers or preyed upon by wild animals.

Just as they had planned to do, the three boys told that they were from a ranch away down in the Southwest, coming up in the Northern country just to look around, and see how things were done here. Adrian had quickly made sure that he did not know any one of the men, and this seemed to promise that they could not have the least suspicion regarding his own identity.

It was Donald who led the conversation to the

subject of the ranches within a radius of fifty miles; and when one of the others happened to mention the Bar-S among several, the Arizona boy remarked:

"Seems to me I've heard considerable about that same Bar-S Ranch. And whoever it was told me must have said it was a bang-up outfit, as smart as any in Wyoming. Let's see, it's owned by a man named Comstock, ain't it, pards?"

He saw the three cowboys turn toward each other, and thought a flicker of a smile passed over their weather-beaten faces, while one winked his eye at the same time.

"Oh! Fred Comstock he's on'y manager of that Bar-S Ranch," replied one.

"He *used* to be," chuckled a second, "and as husky a little manager as you'd be apt to run up against in a month out here."

"Why, who's the manager now, then?" asked Adrian, rather startled; for he had not had any intimation of a change; and certainly nothing of the kind had ever been instituted with his consent.

At that the three cow-punchers chuckled some more.

"Why, you see, everybody reckons as how *Mrs.* Fred Comstock she holds the whip hand over pore old Fred; and runs things as she feels like at the Bar-S," came the puzzling reply.

Then Adrian remembered that a year and more ago he had heard that Uncle Fred, being an old

bachelor, had married; though the woman whom he had taken to his heart was utterly unknown to the boy. He had sent them his best wishes, and a generous present at the time, and then forgotten all about it, because a boy of Adrian's age could hardly be expected to care in the slightest degree about such things.

"Oh! is that it?" remarked Donald, elevating his eyebrows. "Seems to me I heard that this same Fred Comstock was a little terror, and his punchers minded him from the word go. Has he changed any since he got in double harness, boys?"

"Changed any?" echoed one of the rough riders, with a grin; "well, you'd never know it was the same old Fred Comstock these fine days. He ain't got a bit of spunk any more, seems like. She just orders him around like he was a waterboy. Reckon that woman must be a terror when she gets mad, and everybody says as how Fred he had both his eyes black for a month before he give in. She runs the ranch as she sees fit. But that ain't the wust of it, neither."

"Why, what more could there be, with poor old Fred Comstock sat down on in such a way?" demanded Donald, noticing that the three men looked toward each other, and acted in a mysterious fashion, as though afraid about saying too much.

"Well, we don't want our names mentioned in the matter," said one, finally; "but you see, this Mrs.

Fred was one of the Walkers before she got spliced."

"And who are the Walkers?" continued Donald, bent on learning all he could, for the benefit of his chum, who was listening eagerly, his face filled with surprise, because all this was indeed news to him.

"The Walkers—well, they happen to be a pretty numerous family in Wyoming at the present time," replied his informant, cautiously.

"They got three ranches down south from here, and people says as how—" began a second cow-puncher, when one of his mates held up a finger warningly—"well, all I'm agoin' to say is that lots of people believe they ain't runnin' them three ranches jest for the cattle they raise. Some say the Walkers are bootleggers in the dry counties, acarryin' lickor when it's against the law. Others have gone further and call 'em a bunch of cattle rustlers; but as for *me*, kids, remember that I ain't asayin' anything agin that bunch, I don't know a thing; I'm just tellin' what I heard other folks say."

"It may be true, and agin it might be a pack o' lies," a second remarked, as he prepared to start off again, after shaking hands with Adrian and his chums.

"But where there's smoke there's nearly always fire," observed Donald, sagaciously, as he in turn took the hand of each of the three genial punchers in his.

"You never spoke truer words, my friend," said

the last man, leaning down to speak in a low tone, as though he feared that the trees might carry what he said to hostile ears; "and while you're around these diggin's best remember not to get *too much* interested in what the Walkers are adoin'. They seem to have a wide chain o' friends, and nobody ain't ever had the grit to round that bunch up, so far. We used to work on the Bar-S before *she* came there, but it soon got too warm for us, and we quit. So-long, boys; hope you get safe back again down in old Arizona, where some of us may drop in later on; and if we do, we'll sure hunt up the Keystone Ranch, and ask for Donald Mackay."

With that he too whirled his cow pony around, and waving his hand to the boys, went off at a reckless pace in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NIGHT ALARM.

"THAT was a time you got some news that looks like it staggered you, Adrian," remarked Billie, after the three cow-punchers had dashed away, on their road west.

"Seems like it," declared the one addressed, who was scratching his head in a puzzled way; "but do

you know, it's hard to believe that any sort of woman could get the whip-hand over my Uncle Fred. Why, there never was a more fiery and determined character. He ran things with an iron hand, even that puncher admitted as much. How he could be brought under a woman's thumb is more'n I can understand."

"Oh!" spoke up Donald, sagaciously, "you don't know how some women can manage. And from the way that fellow mentioned Mrs. Fred I reckon now that she's that big she can just fling her hubby around like a cat, when she's riled up. Two black eyes is going some, and for a whole month too! Looks like you might be getting a little closer to an explanation of the queer things that have been going on up here on your Bar-S Ranch, Chum Adrian."

"Yes, it looks like it," agreed the other; "but I'll never believe Uncle Fred is ruled by a petticoat till I see it with my own eyes. He's a small man, but a masterful fighter. I can remember him flinging a fellow twice his heft in a wrestling match; for Uncle Fred has been in Japan, and learned the ju jitsu way of doing an antagonist up."

"Mebbe he has," remarked Billie, who was taking pains to search his pack for the bottle of which hazel, meaning to get to work easing the pain of the lame back Jupiter had; "but seems like it don't work with a female scrapper; or else your unk is too gallant a gentleman to apply such strong tactics

against the wife of his bosom, so he lets her get the best of every scrimmage, till his spirit is broken—leastwise that was what our cowboy friend seemed to imply just now.”

“It’s something to think about, anyhow,” observed Donald; “and for one I’m right glad we ran across those punchers. And we know about the Walkers, too. Fine bunch to have around, ain’t they, now? And Mrs. Fred, he took pains to tell us, was one of the Walkers before she got married! There’s a nigger in this woodpile somewhere, Adrian, and looks like it might be up to us to find out just where.”

“We will, before we head back South again, depend on that,” said Adrian, with the set look about his mouth that his chums knew so well, and which spoke of a grim determination before which every obstacle must give way.

They now set about making themselves as comfortable as possible, meaning to camp there in among those few trees for the night, which was only a couple of hours distant. As this was a very old story with both Adrian and Donald, and even Billie now came to look upon it as a lesson well learned, they knew just how to go about it in order to get the best results.

The ponies were staked out, not that it was expected that any one of the well-trained animals would stray far away while cropping the grass; but

on account of wild animals, or possible horse thieves, it was thought best to have them within reach, and so fastened that they could not be stampeded in any way.

Then came the duty of starting the cooking fire. This was usually Billie's job, for he had shown considerable ability along the cooking line, and moreover relished being placed in a position where his allowance of "grub" could not be cut down by ruthless hands.

On this particular occasion Billie was so much taken up with doctoring the sore back of his pony that Adrian took the duty of making the fire on his shoulders.

In lieu of stones with which to build a fireplace where coffee-pot and frying-pan could rest, he simply dug out a hole in the ground, and started his blaze there. Later on, when this became half-filled with glowing embers, it would be time to commence the business of getting their camp supper.

No matter where they might happen to partake of a meal, or how good the fare at some of the taverns they had struck in towns along the way, Billie loved the genuine camp meal best of all. They had found chances to do some shooting when on the trail, so that it was seldom they were without fresh meat for supper. On several occasions Billie had even insisted on purchasing a big generous beef-steak in some town through which they happened

to pass along about the middle of the afternoon, when it was decided that they would keep on and camp out, the weather conditions seeming favorable.

There was some venison still in the larder, for on the previous day Adrian had managed to creep up close enough to several feeding antelope to attract their attention by waving his red bandanna, while he lay sheltered from their view among a patch of rattle-snake weeds; the timid animals had started to run away at first, and then that fatal gift of curiosity began to get in its work, so that they had stopped, come back a little, run off again, and repeated these hesitating tactics until the sportsman, believing they were within easy rifleshoot, had taken aim and knocked over a youngster.

And there was plenty left for a full meal all around, even counting on Billie as two persons, which the others generally did.

"We're going to have a decent night of it, I reckon," observed Donald, as the three of them sat around, just before sunset, and discussed the tender venison that had been cooked, and which along with coffee, and plenty of crackers, made up their supper.

"Yes," added Adrian, with a glance aloft as he spoke, "some clouds floating over, perhaps, but not enough to mean rain. And the moon ought to come up in less'n two hours from now."

"Glad of it," ventured Billie, wondering if he

could manage to dispose of that last piece of meat in the pan, for it always distressed him to throw anything away; "because I just hate black nights. You never know what might lie close to you, out here on the big open, when it's like the inside of your hat. But give me the jolly moonlight. I just love the nights when you can look out miles away, and tell when a measly old wolf is creeping up."

At that the others laughed.

"Seems like you hadn't learned your lesson yet, Billie," remarked Adrian. "Just wait till the brightest night you ever saw comes along, and find out how far away you can say for sure whether it's a stump you see, or a cow lying down. Moonlight is all good enough close at hand, but this thing of telling your best friend two hundred yards away is silly. It can't be done, can it, Donald?"

"Well, I should say not," agreed the other.

"You surprise me, fellows!" declared Billie; "and the first chance I get I'm going to put it to the test. But mebbe not to-night, because I'm that weary after my hot ride I feel like I could lie right down now, and never open my eyes till sun-up."

"That wouldn't surprise us any, Billie," chuckled Donald; "fact is, it's a regular habit with you, seems like. I've rolled you over as many as seven times, and only got a few grunts out of you to pay me for it. A dash of cold water in your face is often the only way we have of waking you up."

"Yes, and every time I'm dreaming that I've fallen overboard in Niagara River, and find myself floating down the terrible falls!" declared the fat boy, "so please let up on that game, won't you? Try sticking a pin in me if you want. P'raps then I'll go and dream I'm bleeding to death; but even that's better than to drop over Niagara Falls."

They sat there as night fell, chatting, and occupying themselves in various ways. Adrian had his log to write up, and no doubt would do full justice to the wild ride that the fat chum had been forced to take that afternoon, all on account of the mean trick played by the village boy. Donald was writing a letter to his home folks, which he hoped to mail on the next day somewhere; while Billie wandered out several times to where Jupiter was tethered, wishing to put more soothing balm on the abrasion caused by the bunch of sand spurs weighed down under the saddle.

About the time the battered moon appeared above the level horizon in the east all of them were thinking of making their beds ready, being more or less tired after the long day's journey.

It was not thought worth while to stand guard, for the ponies had been trained so as to give warning if anything out of the common came about. Both Adrian and Donald were light sleepers, and should the horses commence to snort, or strike the ground

with their hoofs, the sound was sure to awaken one or both lads.

Each of them had a heavy double blanket along, which would feel very comfortable during these chilly nights. Wrapped up in this, Billie found it easy to shut off all sounds, and could be asleep in about three minutes, because he never worried over anything, leaving all this to his chums.

But then neither of the others was very long in getting to sleep on this night. Possibly Adrian lay there for a little while, puzzling his brain over the singular news he had received from those three cow-punchers, with reference to the remarkable change that had come to pass in the domestic relations of Uncle Fred; but in good time he too yielded to the demands of Nature, and slept peacefully.

It must have been some hours later when Donald lifted his head to listen. Then he gave Adrian a little punch, as he whispered:

"Wake up, Ad; something doing, I reckon, because our horses are acting queer and uneasy out here."

Instantly the other sat up, throwing back his blanket, while his hand, perhaps unconsciously, reached out for the faithful rifle that had lain close beside him as he slept.

"Hear 'em?" inquired Donald, presently.

"I should say, yes," came the reply; "and just as you say, Donald, it must mean danger of some kind.

The moon's behind the clouds, and p'raps we're going to have some sort of a storm after all, because that sounds like thunder I hear."

"Listen again, Ad," said the other, quickly, "and perhaps you'll change your mind about the *kind* of thunder that is. When a heap of hoofs come down chunketty-chunk on the hard prairie it always makes that thunder noise."

At that Adrian jumped to his feet.

"What's that, Donald?" he cried, excitedly, "do you mean long-horns?"

"Just what I do, and heading this way as fast as they can come. Sure you must know all the signs right well, Adrian; you've been on the range enough to understand when cattle get frightened, and start off on a stampede. That's what's happened; and as they go past this timber, p'raps we can see what it all means!"

CHAPTER V.

THE STAMPEDE.

THE two boys stood there, listening to the sounds that constantly increased in volume, as though approaching rapidly nearer the camp in the timber growing along the little stream.

There could no longer be the slightest doubt **as**

to what made the noise. Before now Adrian had heard enough to fully agree with his chum when the other pronounced it a stampede of cattle. Besides the crash of many hoofs on the earth, they could catch wild snortings, low, frightened lowings, and the rattle of striking horns; all of which were very familiar sounds to both lads, as they had witnessed just such sights on many a previous occasion.

"The queer part of it is," Adrian had taken pains to say before the noise grew so boisterous as to prevent all ordinary conversation, "that there doesn't seem to be anything around to start such a wild rush. A storm will do it quicker than most anything else, and there couldn't be one in the quarter where they're heading from."

"Wait and see," Donald had wisely added; if he suspected anything as to the real facts he did not appear willing to share his thoughts with his chum as yet, waiting doubtless until he could pick up further proof.

"Shall we wake Billie up?" asked Adrian.

"He'd never forgive us if we didn't," the other replied. "You'd think the sound would get him to stirring, but Billie could sleep through the biggest earthquake that ever happened; and if you did knock him up he'd want to know who was shaking the floor with dancing. But I'll get him on his feet, while you fetch our ponies in."

So Donald stepped over to where the fat chum

was cuddled up in his blanket just like an Esquimau. After shaking him several times without any result, save a grunt, Donald shouted in his ear :

“Wake up, Billie! earthquake! cattle stampede, and we’re right in the way!”

“Goodness gracious! is that so?” remarked Billie, as he sat up, and began to dig his knuckles into his eyes; then, hearing the roar of the approaching hoofs he became suddenly greatly excited, as he realized that it was after all no joke his comrades were trying to play upon him.

“Oh! will they grind us to powder, Donald? Can’t we even climb a tree, and get out of reach of their hoofs? Hurry up, and say something before it’s too late! Think what a terrible muss there’ll be if ever they trample on me, and do please tell a fellow what to do!”

“Don’t worry, Billie; they won’t come into the timber at all. Fetch your gun, and come along to join Adrian near by. We want to see what it all stands for as the herd sweeps past. Be quick now, or you’ll lost a sight worth looking at, I tell you!”

Billie hurried at hearing this. Besides, he did not exactly fancy being left behind when his chum departed.

“How about the ponies, Donald; won’t they get in trouble?” he managed to call out, as he trailed along in the wake of the other.

“I reckon Adrian has brought the lot into the

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timber ; he was just starting out to do the same when I came to wake you up. Yes, here he is, and with all our horses safe and sound. Fasten Jupiter to a tree with his rope, and be quick about it, Billie ! ”

This was speedily done, after which the trio of Broncho Rider Boys crouched there on the edge of the timber, waiting until the herd of stampeding cattle came along.

“ If that moon'd only draw out stronger,” said Adrian, as he cast a look upward toward the sky, over the face of which light clouds were drifting lazily ; “ but it don't mean to, and we'll just have to do the best we can. Look sharp, boys ! ”

“ I can see 'em coming right now ! ” announced Billie.

In fact all of them saw the fast-moving blurr upon the prairie some little distance away, which they knew must be the cattle rushing headlong toward them, spurred on by some unseen power, either fear, or a more tangible force.

Ten seconds later and they were on a line with the hidden boys, who, crouching there, stared as hard as they could, trying to see whether wolves were chasing after the herd, as might happen when the ferocious animals were in great numbers, but not otherwise ; or what other cause there could be for such a great commotion among the cattle.

“ Oh ! did you see that steer go down ? ” ejaculated Billie suddenly. “ He must a put his forelegs in a

gopher hole, and before he could get up the rest had trampled him into flinders. Whee! ain't I glad that wasn't Jupiter and me!"

"You've a right to be thankful, believe me," said Donald, solemnly; "because it'd be all over with you before you could give more'n a single yelp. That steer was a big and powerful beast, but you saw how even he couldn't get up again, once those many hoofs began to pound him flat. We'll find him there afterwards, and only food for the coyotes."

The stream of cattle had now swept past them, and the thunder of their many hoofs was gradually growing less insistent as they passed on.

"Well, that was a queer sight, sure," said Billie, rubbing his eyes, as though he hardly knew whether he could believe what they had told him or not.

Adrian was strangely quiet, Donald thought.

"Did you ever see a stampede like it?" asked Donald, determined to find out what the other chum's opinion might be.

"I surely never did, if it *was* a real stampede," returned Adrian, slowly, as if he might still be struggling to see light.

"Oh! it was that, all right, but not one brought about by a storm, nor yet by fear of wild animals," Donald continued.

"Then you heard them too, did you?" demanded the other.

"What was that?" asked Billie, arousing to the

fact that he was somewhat behind, and never liking to be left out of a race through any handicap.

"Cowboys yelling like mad!" Donald went on to say, seriously.

"Oh! you mean that they were trying the best they knew how to head off the herd and start them to milling; was that it?" Billie went on; for he had managed to pick up considerable information connected with a cattle ranch during the time he had spent on the border with his cousin, down in Arizona.

"On the other hand," Donald remarked, still more solemnly, "it struck me they were yelling like that to make the long-horns more frightened than ever; because they whooped like wild Injuns off their reservation, and in for a gay old time."

Billie gave it up. His wits were inclined to be a little dense at best; and on being so suddenly aroused from a sound sleep, to witness this strange passing of a stampeded herd of cattle, he was hardly in a fair condition to do himself justice when it came to figuring what a mystery meant.

"I throw up the sponge!" he hastened to say; "somebody'll just have to take hold and whisper what it all means; because for the life of me I ain't able to get a grip on the thing. What's the answer, fellows? Cowboys awhooping things up, and making more work for themselves by scaring the life half out of their cattle. Say, that's a silly thing to

do, strikes me, now, boys. Tell me what possesses the chump to act that way? And be quick about it, because when I'm that curious it's dangerous to leave me groping in the dark. Don't you know fellows have been known to pine away to nothing just because they kept aworrying about something. Donald, what's it mean?"

"Adrian you tell him, while I get that little electric torch we used to find so valuable; I'd like to step out and take a look at that dead steer, now that the danger's gone past."

The roar of many hoofs was dying away by degrees in the near distance, showing that the herd must still be on the full run, and as filled with fright as when the boys saw them sweep past.

"Why," began Adrian, as the other hurried back to where the red embers of the little camp-fire glowed like a wakeful eye among the trees, "all I can say, Billie, is that the herd was in a panic, and had been frightened. If there were punchers galloping along, as both Donald and I think we made out, they didn't seem to be trying to head the cattle off, or turn them, but kept in the rear, or the flank, and yelled just to keep them hustling. Now do you catch on, Billie?"

"Rustlers, you mean, Adrian; cattle thieves carrying off a bunch of the long-horns!" ejaculated the astonished Billie. "Just to think of running on a game as old as that the very first thing we

come up here? Why, I thought that was only a practice along the border, where the rustlers could drive the stolen cattle over into Mexico, and be safe from pursuit."

"Oh! that's all a mistake, Billie!" declared Adrian; "wherever cattle are raised on any large scale you'll find men trying to steal them, and change the marks; because once this is done it's hard to pick out your own property. And unless both of us are mighty much mistaken, that's what was being done with that herd we saw pass by on the gallop. But here comes Donald with the little torch; and as the dust has partly settled by now, we can go out and take a look around."

"And," said Billie, as if to show that he was not so dull as he had been once upon a time, "if them rustlers *were* chasing along behind the herd we'll find the plain hoofprints of their ponies there; because they'll show up different from the split hoofs of the steers, eh, Adrian?"

"Good for you, Billie; you're on to the racket nowadays!" declared the other; and then Donald coming up, the three stepped out toward the spot where they had seen the unlucky steer fall never to rise again.

There was little trouble about finding the remains, for these prairie boys had a fashion of locating things at the time they happened, so that they could head straight to them again when they wished.

And just as Donald had said, the wretched animal had been pounded almost flat by the many hoofs that passed over him. They might find some decent pieces of beef to make use of, and that was all, for even the hide had been ruined.

Adrian took the torch from his chum's hand. They saw him bend down closer as if to examine the flank of the dead steer. Hardly had he done so than he gave utterance to a loud cry.

"What have you found now?" demanded Billie, scenting new developments in the remarkable mystery which had greeted their advent into the Wyoming cattle country.

"Look at this mark here!" was what the other said, as he drew in a long breath; and of course both Donald and the fat chum dropped on their knees, the better to see what was meant.

And there, plainly branded on the flank of the dead animal was the sign manual which Adrian recognized as his own property, a bar, and the letter S!

CHAPTER VI.

TO STAND BY A CHUM.

"WHY, ain't that your brand, Adrian?" gasped Billie, who was not very quick to catch on to things, as a rule.

"Just what it is," replied the other, between his set teeth.

"Then this steer belonged to the Bar-S herd, didn't it?" the fat boy continued, gradually approaching the point of full comprehension about as one might circle around and around in a whirlpool, getting nearer the center all the while.

"No doubt of it, Billie," Donald took the trouble to say.

"And chances were, that whole drove that was stampeded right under your eyes as it were, must a been the Bar-S herd of cattle. Gee whiz! now what d'ye think of that for a warm reception? Must a been a committee appointed to meet up with Adrian Sherwood, and let him know that things were moving lively up here, all right."

The idea was so vast that Billie seemed to fall into a reflective mood; just as if he needed time to grasp its full significance.

Donald turned to the other chum.

At least he was not in need of further explanations in order to understand just what that strange panic among the cattle stood for.

"It was a stampede with an object ahead of it, Adrian!" he exclaimed, gritting his teeth savagely together as he spoke.

Adrian simply nodded his head. He seemed almost too full for words; but apparently the other understood his feelings, for he went right on, driving in his points very much as a woodchopper might his wedge when splitting a log.

"Those punchers were not trying to head off the herd, but shouting to keep the long-horns running in a mad bunch," he said, positively, and getting another affirmative nod from the other he continued: "they had started the stampede themselves, and just had to keep it up until they accomplished their object, which it's easy to guess had the stealing of the beef as the chief thing."

"No wonder I've been getting such poor returns from the ranch the last year, if this sort of thing has been going on long," muttered Adrian.

"If it happened down near the Keystone, the ranchers would get together, and soon hunt the rustlers to the end of their trail," added Donald.

"But this is away up in Wyoming, and seems like they do things differently here," Billie woke up in time to say, wisely.

"Yes, and only because a lot of bad men have banded together, and held the ranch owners under their thumbs," Adrian said, bitterly. "Remember what that puncher told us about these Walkers, and how they ran things about as they pleased up around here, getting bolder and bolder all the while. But time was when they would have had my fire-eater of an uncle after them with a hot stick, for he was noted because of his being afraid of nothing—in those good old days before my father died."

Billie was heard from again at this juncture.

"Huh! that was before he took to himself a wife, and she one of this same Walker breed," he remarked.

Donald chuckled, while Adrian sighed.

"It's almost impossible for me to believe such a terrible change has taken place in Uncle Fred," the latter went on to say, shaking his head sadly; and then as if his anger began to get the better of all other feelings he continued: "but there's going to be a change take place in other ways too, or else my name isn't Adrian Sherwood. This wholesale stealing from the Bar-S Ranch has got to stop, even if I have to fire Uncle Fred and his new wife out of the management."

"It's my opinion," remarked Donald, "that these Walkers are taking advantage of the fact that one of their bunch is installed in the ranch house at your place, to just do about as they please. When they

run across a fine herd with your brand on the same, they wait around for a certain night to come along, run them off like it was common rustlers doing the job, round them up somewhere, change the brand to one of their own, and inside of forty-eight hours your cattle are feeding on their range with all signs blotted out. And I just about reckon Mrs. Fred is fixing things so her dear hubby don't dare lift a hand to prevent this robbery! Blood is thicker than water, they say."

Adrian ground his teeth savagely.

"That's the bitterest pill I ever had to swallow in all my life!" he declared. "To think of me squatting here and watching those cowardly thieves run off with a big bunch of my best cattle, and not able to lift a hand to prevent the raid! It makes me mad to the core."

"I should say it might," Billie asserted. "Why, even my blood is boiling with indignation; and I ain't near so hot-tempered as you, Adrian. Can't something be done about it?"

"Oh! what wouldn't I give to have some of the bully Keystone boys around right now," said Donald; "suppose we could just run across Si Ketcham, Cooney, Alkali, Magpie, Bunch and the rest, wouldn't I yell with joy though; and say, what we'd do to these onery rustlers would be a caution."

"But we're only three boys after all!" sighed Billie, sadly.

"Three boys though, who have been used to taking care of themselves this long while, don't forget to add, Billie," Adrian burst forth; "and right now I'm wondering whether it would be such a very mad scheme for us to trail after those punchers to try and get my cattle back! What d'ye think of that, boys? Have we got the nerve to make a try?"

"Oh! my stars!" ejaculated Billie, rather overwhelmed by the mere thought; but the prairie boy did not seem to be staggered at all.

"Adrian, if you say the word I'm itching to give you my hand on that, and go you!" Donald exclaimed with thrilling emphasis.

"Do you really mean it?" demanded the other, eagerly.

For answer the Mackay boy did thrust out his hand, and it was instantly clasped in a savage clutch, showing how thoroughly aroused both lads were.

"And say, whatever's doing, don't you dare forget to count me in," piped up Billie, who was immediately afraid lest they might set out to arrange plans that would leave him in the lurch, perhaps to 'tend camp while they rode off; and he was determined to rebel against such an ignominious discard.

"Could we overtake the cattle, do you think, Donald?" asked Adrian.

"I reckon that wouldn't take us so very long," came the reply.

"They would soon tire out," suggested the young owner of the Bar-S Ranch.

"When they passed here they showed signs of it; and if the punchers had let 'em, they'd soon quiet down. Reckon, Ad, they won't go many miles further before they just slow up, and then come to a full stop."

"Mebbe them rustlers was adriving the bunch right at some place where they're in the habit of changing the brands?" suggested Billie, determined to have some say in the matter, to prove that he was wide-awake, and on the job.

"Sure they must have been, Billie, and that remark shows that you've got your wits about you!" declared Donald; and then turning again to the third member of the little group he went on: "if you mean it, Ad, and say the word, why we'll pull out of these diggings in a rush, and chase after the herd."

"It wouldn't be very long before we'd hear the rumble again, if we kept right on the way they were heading when they passed here," observed Adrian, thoughtfully.

"That's right," Donald assured him.

"Then the only question is, could we manage the bad men who are running off the Bar-S stock. At a guess now, Donald, how many of them do you reckon there might have been chasing after the stampeding herd?"

Donald seemed to study for a few seconds.

"I paid particular attention to their yelling," he presently remarked; "and noticed where the shouts came from. Now, I couldn't be dead sure, Ad, but as near as I can say I'd put it down as about four punchers."

"Whee! they made a heap of noise then, for just that many," remarked Billie.

"That's right," agreed Donald, instantly; "but when you come to know punchers as well as I do, Billie, you'll understand that four lively boys when they're slapping their chaps with quirts and hats, and howling like mad to frighten stock, can make a racket equal to a dozen other fellows. There may have been one or two more, but still I think four'd cover the bill, Adrian."

"That settles it!" declared the other, briskly.

"We go, do we?" demanded Billie, all of a quiver with sudden excitement.

"Adrian says so," Donald told him, just as though they must look to the owner of the Bar-S outfit for guidance on this campaign, since he was in his own country now, and his chums had accompanied him simply to carry out his wishes.

"Well, things are looking brighter already," remarked Billie; "because there's the old moon apeeking out, like she wanted to give us a helping hand. Now, I ain't much on signs and such things, fel-

lows, as you know; but seems to me like that same was a lucky omen."

"It'll give us some light to travel by, and that counts a heap," declared Donald always practical, and not given so much to sentiment as the fat chum, who had been a great reader of Marryatt and Cooper before coming out West, so that he had filled his mind with the romantic side of open air life.

"Then the sooner we get busy the better," Adrian went on to say; and then turning on Donald he continued: "if you're dead sure you meant that, when I mentioned wanting to chase after these rascals."

"Let me tell you that I was just going to say the same thing myself, but thought you ought to have first chance," the other boy assured him. "You know me from the ground up, Ad. And why shouldn't I want to lend you a helping hand? Ain't you my good chum; and tell me, didn't you and Billie stand by me like bricks down there in the mountains of Arizona when it looked like Calvin Peets, the agent of the combine that was trying to steal the Red Spar Copper Mine away from my dad and his associates, backed up by that anarchist, Laidlaw? Huh! turn about is only fair play, and it's come my chance now to stand back of my chum. Why, I'm that crazy to go after these rustlers that even if you held back I'd be wanting to take up the job by myself."

Adrian gave a laugh as though his last lingering doubt had been removed.

"After hearing you talk that way I'd be a silly fool to doubt any longer," he went on to declare; "and so let's get back to our camp, start packing our duffel in a big hurry, and then make a start after that runaway herd with the brand of the Bar-S on their flanks!"

With which words he led the way back among the trees to the spot where their blankets, saddles, cooking utensils and other things were lying.

CHAPTER VII.

FOLLOWING THE CATTLE RUSTLERS.

"How about our ponies?" Billie wanted to know. "Will they be able to stand for another dash so soon?"

"Cow ponies are tough little critters," Donald went on to say, with the utmost confidence; "and they recover from fatigue like magic. Right now I'd wager Wireless or Ten Spot would be good for a twenty mile gallop at full speed."

"I notice you don't include my Jupiter," grumbled Billie, suspiciously; "mebbe now you're counting on him to play out in short order, when poor Broncho Billie'll have to be dropped behind, to

toddle along the best way he can, while the rest of you are having all the fun."

"Oh! I wouldn't worry about that, if I were you, Billie," Adrian told him; "for you'll find that Jupiter is as fresh as a daisy by now, and able to carry you right along hour after hour. I'm ready to pin my faith to these cow ponies every time. They're wonders, that's what."

"Yes," added Donald, who did not like to see the good-natured fat chum worried in any way; "and as we agreed before, since the cattle were already blowing hard when they passed here, chances are they'll come to a halt before many miles; so after all we won't have to go so very far."

"I'm glad to hear it," mumbled Billie, who was not feeling very much like taking a lengthy gallop, after his late experiences in that line; the saddle chafed him more or less, because of his heft, and he suffered to a greater extent than either of his comrades knew about.

They were hastily getting their things packed. This was not so much of a job to fellows who had done such things a long time. The blankets made a small roll, to be fastened behind their saddles; then the few cooking things were distributed around, each one being responsible for a certain utensil, which he was expected to produce when next it was needed. In this way coffee-pot, frying-pan, tin

platters and tin cups were stowed away, and occupied very little space.

Each boy had a small bag in which he kept a few extras, a fresh flannel shirt and necessities. Billie also lugged along some other things in the way of a jar of marmalade, of which he was especially fond, a strip of breakfast bacon, tea, coffee, and such things. He would not let his chums think of loading themselves down with anything that poor Jupiter could carry on his broad back; and so when he was fully fixed for riding he looked like a nomadic peddler starting out on his trip.

But Billie at least had long ago learned the art of packing his stuff securely. Only for that fact he must surely have left a lot of his packages scattered along the trail at the time Jupiter ran away with him, after the stable boy at the inn had played that mean trick with the poison-tipped sand spurs.

Of course he was only partly packed when both the others announced themselves as ready to move.

"But I hope now, you won't think of starting out, and leaving me behind, fellows?" Billie voiced his new alarm by saying.

They hastened to reassure him.

"We're not in such a big hurry as all that, Billie," said Adrian.

"And here, let me give you a hand," remarked Donald.

"That's the stuff!" gurgled the fat chum, who

had all along been hoping to have some assistance; for Donald knew how to put things in ship-shape so well; while on the other hand Adrian was the best hand at cinching girths, and tightening up ropes on a pack animal Billie had ever struck.

Between them they soon made things ready; and Billy hastened to climb up into his saddle. That word would appear to be the only one capable of doing justice to his method of attaining a seat; for Billie was very clumsy, it must be remembered; and then those packages were forever getting in the way, so that even an agile fellow like Donald for instance might have found it difficult to leap into his saddle while his animal was thus encumbered.

But they were all ready at last; and Donald led the little bunch of riders out from the timber that grew along the little stream.

It was now bright moonlight. The clouds had drifted past, and the sky seemed to be free from horizon to horizon, which fact pleased the Broncho Rider Boys not a little. There is always more or less danger of a nasty spill when galloping over the prairie in pitch darkness, for no one can tell when a prairie dog village may be encountered; and if a pony sets his foot in one of their burrows the chances are he will go down in a heap, possibly with a broken leg; and his rider may account himself lucky if he escapes a similar fate, or gets his neck broken in addition.

Billie in particular was always worried when circumstances compelled them to ride in the dark. He declared that, not being nimble like his comrades, and spry enough to play the cat act so as to land on his hands and feet, a tumble was apt to go much harder with him; and perhaps there was good reason for this feeling of uneasiness on Billie's part. At any rate his chums were always willing to cater to his wishes in the matter, when it could be reasonably done.

But now that smiling moon made the fat boy feel quite at his ease.

As soon as they were clear of the trees Donald headed directly southwest, for that was the direction taken by the stampeded herd. Looking down he could easily discover where their hoofs had torn up the soil of the prairie; and as long as the friendly light from above held out, the ranch boy believed that he could follow that plain trail, even though they heard no sound from ahead to give them pointers as to where the cattle had gone.

He and Adrian rode side by side, so that from time to time they could exchange sentences. Billie on the other hand was quite willing to bring up the rear. He was accustomed to "taking other people's dust," as he himself frankly admitted, and did not object seriously to such a thing.

So far as he could discover Jupiter was feeling all right again after his rest, and offered no objec-

tion to keeping up the swift pace set by the others.

"Of course after we begin to haul up on them," said Donald, presently, "we'll cut down the pace more or less, so they won't get wind of our being around."

"I wonder what sort of luck we'll have," Adrian was saying, showing that he had been trying to figure things out in his mind. "Of course I take it for granted that we'll come up with the rustlers; but it's another thing to get them off their guard, so we can make them prisoners, and take the cattle away with us."

"Yes, that's so," assented Donald, "but you never know what you can do till you make a try; and we've carried out a few jobs on our own hook, you and me, Adrian, if you stop to think."

"As big as this one seems to be, for a fact, Donald," agreed the other, brightening up under the inspiring remarks of his chum, just as Donald supposed would be the case.

"Of course, Ad, we can't lay any plans till we see how the ground lies," the other went on to say; "after they've got the cattle quieted down I reckon those rustler fellows will take things easy. They've run matters with such a free hand up around here so long now, that they just can't imagine anybody daring to interfere with their business."

"Yes," added Adrian, "and perhaps if they were held up and asked to give an account of the cattle

they were running off they'd have the nerve to say they'd even *bought* them from Fred Comstock at the Bar-S Ranch; and refer the questioners to the lady who has taken the whip hand up at my place. Oh! it's all a mighty clever game, I can see that plain enough; only it's a case of 'heads they win, tails I lose.' I'm on the wrong side of the fence every time. But something told me I ought to be wandering up this way; and say, Donald, it's lucky now I didn't write to Uncle Fred, and give him the least hint about my plans?"

"Luck is no name for it!" exclaimed the other; "it was the finest thing ever happened to you, Adrian. And let me tell you, I feel it in my bones right now that we're going to kick up a dickens of a row up here by coming just when these same Walkers are playing one of their periodical little sneak games."

"Perhaps you're right, Donald; I hope so, anyhow."

"It's my impression," continued the other, "that all the ranchers around here need is for some one to take the bitt between their teeth and play leader, when they'll all jump in, and join in the hunt. These Walkers appear to have terrorized the lot so that every man is afraid to have it known he means to take a stand against the hard crowd. That's the idea I got from what that puncher said to us yesterday afternoon."

"But my uncle used to be the leading spirit around here; they all looked to him to do things when there was any need," remonstrated Adrian.

"Oh, shucks!" laughed Donald, "I've seen men that were great hands to boast, and even do things when among their kind, knuckle down, and cringe when they heard their wives speak. And your uncle must have caught a Tartar when he married that Walker widow."

They had already covered several miles, and were going strong at the time these few remarks were exchanged between the chums. Every now and then one of the two who were in the lead would glance over his shoulder to make sure that Billie had not been left far behind; and the fat chum on such occasions would sing out reassuring words, or else wave a hand at his comrade.

As yet they had not caught even the distant sound of the retreating herd. This might be accounted for in any one of several ways; the cattle had possibly gone further than even Donald surmised; or else they had already been brought to a stand by the rustlers, the flight having reached a section of the country suited to their plans, and doubtless often used for the same purposes as were intended at the present time.

When they chanced upon a bit of soft ground where the thud of their ponies' hoofs was for the time being stilled almost completely, Donald strained

his hearing in the hope of catching some indication from ahead that would be encouraging.

And Adrian, hearing him give utterance to an ejaculation, jumped to the conclusion that he had been in a measure successful.

"Get it, Donald?" he called out, eagerly.

"Just what I do," came the immediate answer, in a tone of triumph; "and from the indications I reckon the cattle are about used up, so far as running goes. If you listen right smart you can hear the rustlers urging them on, which shows they haven't yet got to where they mean to stop, though it must be close by, I feel sure!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CORRAL IN BITTERSWEET COULIE.

"THANK goodness!" Billie was heard to mutter in the rear, which remark plainly proved that he must have caught what his comrades were saying.

"We seem to be overtaking them faster now, Donald," Adrian spoke up several minutes afterwards, when he could hear the shouts ahead more plainly, as well as the confusion attending the rush of the bunched cattle.

"Yes, because they've slackened up, and looks like they might be close to the end of the run. P'raps

we'd better draw rein some too, Ad; because it won't do for us to get too close, you know. I notice that the country changes around here."

"We've run on the rough section, where coulies and ravines can be found," the owner of the Bar-S Ranch told him. "I remember this place pretty well; because, unless I'm mistaken, I once had something of an adventure near by, when a wild bull suddenly swung on me, upset my pony, and came near giving me a nasty dig with his horns. Only for a swift fling of a rope on the part of a puncher I might have been badly hurt."

"Well, I wondered if we wouldn't run across some rough country soon," Donald remarked; "because it's always been my experience with these rustlers that whenever they do run off with a bunch of cattle, they want to get away from the open plain, in order to do their dirty work of altering brands. If there's a big coulie near by, take my word for it that's where they are heading for right now."

"Then they'll pull up inside of ten minutes," announced Adrian; "because they'll have reached Bittersweet Coulie by then."

"You ought to know the place right well; and how would it answer for a hide-out, where they could keep the cattle till they'd given every one the Walker brand?" Donald wanted to know.

"All they'd have to do would be to drive them in, and then hang out around the neck of the bottle;

for the coulie is so narrow at the mouth it can be closed as easy as anything," was the reply Adrian made.

"Then take it from me that's the place we're going to bring up at, Ad."

"The sooner the better," Adrian told him.

"Ditto!" came in a grunt from the rear; for Billie liked to let people know he was alive, and able to enter into the game, as well as the next one.

Gradually they kept pulling in their ponies, because it was plain to understand that they were drawing up on those whom they pursued. The sound of yells came very distinctly to their ears, and Donald was even able to tell the shouts of one puncher from those of his mates; so that his former impression that there could not be more than a quartette of the rustlers was confirmed.

The two who led the chase were fully aware of the tremendous task they had undertaken. They did not lightly dash into this thing as though it would turn out to be a regular picnic. But Adrian was so filled with anger and indignation, over being made a witness to his own loss of valuable stock, that he was ready to take considerable risk in order to attempt their recapture.

As for Donald, he had all his life been raised in just such an atmosphere of daring, and it was not so remarkable that he should throw himself into this hazard heart and soul.

Whatever they did, Billie was bound to join in also; with such leaders he would have plodded after, no matter what the risk; for he never stopped to count the cost, if only he did not have to be left alone.

"There! it's come at last!" exclaimed Donald, suddenly; and somehow the very fact of his lowering his voice announced that in his opinion they must begin to exercise due caution.

"They've stopped running, for a fact!" echoed his chum, alongside.

"Course they have," added Billie, just for all the world like a poll parrot.

Donald immediately pulled his pony up sharply.

"Time we called a halt, then, and figured things out," he announced.

"Oh! joy beyond measure!" murmured a faint voice from the rear—Billie talking to himself, of course.

When they had pulled up they sat there in their saddles with heads bent forward, trying to catch further sounds from ahead that would tell in some measure what the rustlers were doing.

The shouts still continued but had changed more or less. Both ranch boys could tell that the punchers must be driving the stock steadily ahead of them now, and in all probability into the gaping jaws of the big ravine known throughout that section as Bittersweet Coulie.

If this proved to be true then Donald's guess had been along correct lines. This little fact seemed like a good omen to begin with. Now, if it turned out that this further prediction regarding the limited number of the rustlers also came to pass, and they could only catch them off their guard before dawn arrived, it would not be strange if they turned the trick, daring as their plans might appear.

"Now, first of all we've got to muffle our ponies' heads so they can't betray us by neighing," announced Donald.

"A good idea, I say," Adrian went on to remark, approvingly. "I've known the best trained cayuse going to let out a neigh when it scented some of its own kind near by. That's a thing they just can't help, seems like. So, the sooner we get their muzzles tied up the better."

"You'll have to show me how," said Billie; "because that's where my education's been sorter neglected, so to speak. But I want to know, just stick a pin in that, please."

He soon learned just how this could be accomplished by the aid of their blankets. The horses objected to such treatment, but had to submit in the end. And when the job had been completed they were so muzzled that they could not have whinnied, no matter how hard they tried.

Mounting them again the three boys moved cautiously ahead. It was their purpose to cover a cer-

tain distance, and then again dismount, after which they would arrange to leave their steeds while they crept up toward the mouth of the coulie.

"That's fine!" Donald suddenly said in a low tone.

"They've started a fire, seems like," whispered Billie; "and I reckon now that's what you meant, Donald?"

"Yes, because it shows that they've got to the end of their run, and mean to take things easy for a spell. Couldn't suit us better, fellows, could it?"

"I only hope they feel like making merry over the grand success of their little raid, and take so many nips from their old bottles that they'll be dropping over in a sound sleep before long," Billie suggested.

"So say we all of us, Billie," Adrian assured him; "that would make things easy for our plans, you know."

Ain't I glad I brought my reliable Marlin along," sighed Billie. "It got me that ferocious old grizzly down in that spur of the Rockies, you remember; and every time it's done the business. All I have to do is to aim straight, and pull the trigger, and it does the rest. And whenever I think of them rustlers getting away with the pick of Adrian's herds it kinder riles me, so that I feel as if I'd like to do something *terrible*—pink one of the same in

the leg, mebbe, and make him sorry he ever embarked in such a measly game."

"Less mumbling, Billie; it won't do to talk after this, unless you've got something worth while to say."

"Huh!" grunted Billie, sorely perplexed as to what Donald might mean by these words; but at the same time falling into his wishes; for he feared that if he gave any trouble by being noisy or clumsy, his chums might take a notion to tell him to stand by and watch the ponies, a job Billie had no liking for at all.

At another time he might have taken exception to that remark about his "having something worth while to say," but just now he must swallow his indignation, and do whatever they told him, if he wanted to be in the hunt.

"How much closer had we better go mounted?" asked Adrian, speaking in a whisper of course.

"I'm hoping to run across a likely spot where we can leave the ponies," Donald told him; "something that is marked, so we can find it again later on without any trouble. And here it is right now. There's a tree growing alongside this rock that lies here on the open prairie, you note, Ad."

"Yes, and seems to me I remember that same rock too; fact is, it was right here that bull knocked my pony over, and wanted to impale me on his horns," Adrian told him.

They dismounted again, and made the animals secure by using their ropes, which could be readily fastened to the tree; and possibly Donald may have had some such idea in his mind when he persisted in looking for a landmark.

Being now free from their ponies, which could not betray them by any shrill neigh, the three boys could advance toward the spot where the fire flickered amidst the brushwood at the mouth of the big coulie.

Each of them gripped his rifle, and was filled with a grim resolution to use this weapon should necessity compel such tactics. At the same time Billie was wishing that they could overpower the rustlers while they slept, making it a bloodless victory; and this in spite of his bold threat made a short time back, too.

The nearer they drew to where the fire had been started the more convinced both ranch boys became that they had guessed the truth when figuring that the cattle thieves must have hurried the stolen herd into the coulie, and intended remaining there near the mouth of the ravine until daylight allowed them to get to work altering the brand of the Bar-S to that of the Walker ranches.

While Donald had expressed his vain wish that some of the husky punchers belonging to the Key-tone ranch away down in Arizona could be with them, to make matters more interesting, Adrian on

his part was also sorry they could not have the assistance of those three stout cowboys whom they had met and exchanged greetings with on the previous afternoon; and whose knowledge of the country, as well as ability to handle cattle, would be a strong factor in carrying out their game.

But this could not be, and as things now looked the three Broncho Rider Boys must depend entirely upon themselves for balking the evil designs of this Walker crowd of rustlers.

CHAPTER IX.

READY TO ACT.

THE cattle had apparently quieted down, now that they were no longer pestered with the shouts of the galloping punchers, coupled with the snap of the cruel quirts. They had run far enough to be in a sweat, and were doubtless glad of the chance to lie down in the coulie, to find the rest they craved. Outside of an occasional "boo," or possibly a crash of horns, there could be heard nothing that would indicate the presence near by of a pretty large bunch of steers.

That ravine would afford the finest sort of a corral, with its narrow neck, in which the fire had

been built, around which the tired rustlers were now grouped, taking things easy, and filled with exultation no doubt because of their fine success in running off the herd without a single shot having been fired, because Mr. Comstock dared not give orders for his men to pursue, with that virago under his roof holding him in check.

After a bit the boys dropped down on all fours, and started to crawl along, since in the bright moonlight it was growing risky to stand erect. Billie had some difficulty in flattening himself as much as he thought necessary; indeed, it seemed to his excited fancy that he must be towering there in a most discouraging way; and he feared that one of the others in glancing back would notice it, and tell him he must diminish his size or else drop out.

But as the ground was broken, and growing rougher every rod or so, neither Donald nor Adrian thought anything of this; and Billie was certainly making a good job of his "creep," they could see, all things considered.

Of course the two would have preferred attempting the business by themselves; but they knew that the fat chum would object to being left out, and in fact absolutely refuse to play so unimportant a part in the proceedings.

And if it did come to a showing of hands they might be glad to have a third member of the party along, so as to overawe the foe by sheer force of

numbers. Besides, Billie carried a rifle, and knew how to use it too; he had demonstrated that fact to the satisfaction of his chums more than once; so that he could not be wholly ignored on such grounds.

They were by now close enough to the fire to be able to see the figures around the blaze. Of course it was only natural for Donald to give Adrian a sly punch in the side, and putting his lips close to the other's ear whisper triumphantly the one word:

"Four!"

And Adrian on his part understood, for he must surely remember that the other had taken the pains to declare it to be his opinion that the rustler crowd could not number more than that many.

Still four husky men would seem like a pretty steep proposition for three half-grown boys to attempt to subdue; and such indeed would have been the case had it been the intention of Adrian and his chums to boldly face the rustlers, and put the decision to a test of sheer muscle, or the ability to shoot straight.

But Donald and his comrades believed they knew a way whereby the odds were apt to turn in their favor. Strategy must take the place of brute force. They would remain there in hiding until it was to be seen how things were going to turn; and if the rustlers either drank heavily, or else allowed sleep to overpower them.

In either case the plan of the boys was to creep

noiselessly into their camp, and in some way overpower them. Perhaps they could impress it upon the minds of the astounded cattle thieves, when the critical moment came, that the bushes near by were fairly bristling with guns held in the hands of angry punchers; who would open fire, and riddle them like sieves, unless they held up their hands and yielded themselves prisoner.

Once this was accomplished neither Donald nor Adrian had any fear but what they would be able to manage things. They knew all about driving cattle; and before leaving the desperadoes they could disarm them, thus rendering them harmless, so far as doing any immediate injury was concerned.

That this would only be the beginning of the war they could easily guess. If the Walkers were as strongly entrenched as people said, they would not be apt to give over their evil practices just because three boys had come up from the Southwest, no matter if one of them did happen to be the owner of the Bar-S Ranch, which for a year and more past they had been systematically despoiling, because the hands of the unfortunate manager were tied by his domestic difficulties.

Such resolute lads as these, however, were not apt to hold back once they had embarked on a course, simply because there might be trouble ahead. Both Adrian and Donald believed in meeting difficulties as they came along, and trying to master them.

They saw their duty, and tried to do it, regardless of what might follow.

And Billie was one of the kind to say "me too," whenever the stronger natures with which his fortunes were connected took a decided stand.

Having finally advanced, as far as seemed wise, the three boys lay there and tried to figure out what was going on by the fire.

One of the rustlers must have been something like Billie, and always had his appetite on tap, for he seemed to be busily engaged in cooking something in the way of meat.

It chanced that the night air was setting toward them, a fact Donald had noticed with more or less satisfaction, since it lessened the chances of any slight sound that one of them might make being heard.

This current of air brought the odor of cooking to their nostrils, and Billie was heard to give several vigorous sniffs that called for a warning kick on the part of Donald, just ahead of the fat boy; whereupon Billie subsided, shaking his head as though he thought it pretty hard lines when a fellow had to lie there, taking in all that delicious fragrance, and not getting even a single bite of the fare.

When it was seen that the other three rustlers were passing a suspicious black bottle around, and taking frequent potations, the boys began to have strong hopes that things might be made easy for

them after all; because they knew that when alcohol once gets a firm grip on a man's brain he is hardly apt to bother himself about what is taking place around him until the effect of his potations wears away.

If only those three men would be so accommodating as to stupefy themselves in quick order, while thus celebrating their successful raid, Donald thought they surely could manage to get the upper hand of the remaining fellow. By that time perhaps he might have eaten so much cooked meat as to be drowsy, and fall a victim almost as easily as the other three.

The minutes passed, and nothing occurred by that fire unnoticed by the sharp eyes of the trio of hidden lads. Billie was forever poking up his head to look, and then quickly drawing it down again in sudden alarm because he fancied he saw one of the rustlers staring in his direction. But of course that was pure imagination, because they lay far away and among the shadows of the trees, so that even the keenest vision possible was not apt to discover their hiding-place.

After half an hour of this sort of thing Billie felt like hugging himself, for he saw the three fellows who had been drinking so heavily giving positive signs of wanting to roll over and go to sleep. Billie would have liked ever so much to communicate his feeling of satisfaction to one of his companions,

because it was always a punishment for him to be kept from talking in some fashion; but whenever he gave the least sign of wanting to whisper Donald would give him a cruel kick, and in this way warn him that silence was golden just then. So the poor fellow had to take it out in telling himself what he thought, and how he hoped now they could soon be making a move looking to the capture of the rustler gang.

Two of the punchers seemed to have succumbed. They lay there just as they had fallen over, and were oblivious to all that was going on.

The third man, who seemed to be something of a leader among them, probably realizing that his own condition was not all that it should be, was shaking his finger in front of the face of the fellow who was still eating, as though giving him to understand that the safety of the camp was going to depend on him.

Billie hoped that he too would lie down and go to sleep. Unless a move took place very soon now he feared that it would be too late for him to get even a bite of that cooked meat which had been tantalizing him for some time; because there did not seem to be any end to that horrible glutton's appetite; and there was only one more piece left right then.

Still, he realized that his chums were not likely to hurry things just to oblige his desire, when they

might be running unnecessary risks in so doing. Patience was something Billie had to cultivate; he told himself that a dozen times, and in spite of it was just as eagerly watching the motions of that perpetual eater by the fire as before, still hoping for the best.

He knew that the other two boys were whispering together, and hoped it might be with regard to making an advance. True, the time that must be consumed in this movement would like as not enable that greedy fellow to make away with the very last piece of cooked meat; but at any rate it would be some satisfaction to be able to jump on him, and give him the scare of his life. If he could not secure the plunder he would take it out some other way; for Billie seemed to have cultivated a most unusual dislike to that particular fellow.

Yes, Donald was twisting his head around right now, and beckoning with his hand, which must surely mean that they were going to raid the camp.

Billie felt a thrill of excitement pass through him. He imagined that this was the fighting spirit that some of his ancestors had shown on battlefields both during the Revolution and the Civil War. He hoped that the Winkle honor was safe in his hands, and that he would not turn out to have coward blood in his veins, for he was very proud of his family.

The three boys crept along, gradually closing in on the fire that still burned cheerily. But Billie

shut his teeth hard whenever he looked up and discovered that the sentry was still munching steadily away. He believed that if the supply only held out the man would be able to sit there for hours and hours, constantly decreasing the visible supply of provisions. But thank goodness! his time had almost come. The "Avengers" were on the track, Billie told himself, and that terrible appetite of his was fated to be soon cut short.

Creeping along in this fashion the three boys found themselves close behind the sentry who was paying far more attention to his task of finishing up the meat he had cooked than he was to guarding the camp.

Finally Donald arose to his feet, still crouching, and gave the signal.

CHAPTER X.

CLEVER WORK.

DONALD had brought his lariat along, under the belief that it might come in handy one way or another. As he thus stood up, just a little way back of the sentry who was sitting there, he had this rope in his hands, Adrian holding both rifles meanwhile.

Billie saw this and drew a long breath, while his

glittering eyes were fixed upon the man with the enormous appetite. It was just as though he might be saying bitterly to himself; "now see what you get for hogging it all; and serve you just about right, too!"

Donald was a clever hand with the lariat. He had learned all the ordinary cow-puncher tricks in making use of a rope; and often bewildered Billie with some of his astonishing throws, back-handed, side ways, and with the queer little jerking movement that adepts can make to serve their purpose without coiling the lariat again.

This was as easy a job as ever came his way; and indeed, Billie himself would have thought it no difficult feat to toss that well-balanced loop directly over the head of the unconscious sentry.

It was done like a flash. The man instinctively knew he was a prisoner the very instant he felt the touch of the descending rope; indeed, he must have heard the whistle of it through the air, for Billie saw him plainly try to duck his head as though he hoped to dodge the cast; but he was too late.

All punchers understand that their only chance when "roped" is to instantly start toward the point from which the loop springs. In this way they may get a slack line, and be able to throw off the noose before it is too late.

As he was instantly jerked over, the sentry had no chance to run or even crawl; but he proved that

he knew his business by trying to *roll* toward Donald, who was taking in the slack rope hand over hand.

When the proper second came he leaped forward and threw himself on the prostrate sentry, whipping the rope around him several times so as to render him helpless.

All this happened in what Billie afterwards described as "three shakes of a lamb's tail." Up to that time the man who had been so taken by surprise had not thought to give a shout; he had followed out the instinct a cowboy always has actuating him; but now that he was in the toils beyond any possibility of freeing himself through his own exertions the fellow remembered that he had companions.

He let out a whoop that would have awakened men in even a more drunken stupor than those who lay there.

Adrian had not been idle, however, during these few seconds of time. Having mapped out his little plan of campaign beforehand he knew what was expected of him. Jumping across the space that separated him from the fire he pounced upon one of the rustlers, and snatched his gun the first thing. That rendered a second fellow next to helpless, for a bad man without his gun is never very dangerous.

Adrian threw the rifle forward, and covered the next man as he was trying to get to his knees.

“Lie down, you, or it’ll be the worst job you ever tackled!” he cried out; and the swing of that rifle convinced the rustler that he had better do as he was told; so he flattened himself out on his face, and remained there motionless, possibly trying to collect his muddled wits and reason it all out.

There was still one more, but Billie had looked out for him. Making threatening motions with his extended rifle as he pushed forward the fat boy confronted this rustler, still sitting there on the ground, and blinking like an owl might on being thrust into an electric glow.

When he saw that it was a boy in front of him, a fat good-natured lad at that, the puncher made as if to reach for his weapon, whereupon Billie thrust out his rifle still closer and shouted:

“Don’t you dare touch it, do you hear! I’ll pull this trigger as sure as my name’s Broncho Billie, and whiff you go into the next world! Hold up both hands before you’re riddled! Want me to give the signal for a dozen guns to blaze away all around you? Don’t you know you’re surrounded by an army? Hold ’em up, higher than that, mister, if you know what’s good for you.”

Donald put an end to the anxiety by suddenly darting forward and whipping the gun out of the rustler’s holster. He had already secured the weapon belonging to the fellow whom Adrian had sub-

dued, so that the enemy was now powerless to do them any immediate injury.

Billie gave a screech in order to relieve his overwrought nerves.

"Victory! We came, we saw, we conquered! Bully for the Broncho Rider Boys; they're a whole team and a dog under the wagon. Told you we could do 'em, fellows! Why, it was as easy as falling off a log. Hope you're going to hog-tie the lot, Donald, now that we've got 'em, so we won't have to be sitting up to keep the same from vamping the ranch; because there might be some other things more pleasant we'd like to be at."

Donald had prepared for just such an emergency beforehand, so that he had plenty of stout cords in his pocket, with which to make the rustlers secure.

He started in to do this. The men had recovered their wits enough by now to display considerable ugly temper. They may even have begun to dimly suspect that they had not been made prisoners by a large company of punchers after all, but that this trio of lively lads represented the sum total of their adversaries.

Donald knew that when they came to understand this humiliating fact they might become so desperate that they would go to any lengths in the endeavor to turn the tables again. That was one reason why he made such haste in getting bonds on the prisoners, with his two chums standing there guns in hand,

and constantly on guard, lest one of the others leap upon Donald.

After the last man had been secured, and they were beginning to growl and swear in a horrible way, Billie thought he might claim a little of his own time in order to carry out some idea he was hugging to his heart.

But when he knelt down where that enormous feeder had been sitting it was only to give a grunt of disgust, for the very last bite of cooked meat had vanished. They had played their hand just a little too late to please Billie, who had such a stubborn way of trying to carry out any scheme he may have conceived, no matter how foolish it might be.

Adrian looked at Donald, and then the two of them shook hands. If ever they experienced the delight of having accomplished something worth while it was then and there, when they found that the four cattle rustlers were in their power, and the way stood open to recover the stampeded herd belonging to Bar-S Ranch.

Billie was not to be left out when the congratulations were going around; and accordingly he insisted on also shaking hands with his chums.

"We got 'em, didn't we, fellows? If they'd been a dozen 'stead of four we could have done the little trick just as easy. Ain't they a sorry bunch, though; and now I wonder if they happen to have any more of that fresh meat along with 'em; because I'm a

bit peaked for a bite, and time's apt to hang heavy on our hands between this and daylight, when we can get busy, and pull out of here."

Sure enough he did find that there was still a small portion of meat uncooked. After learning this Billie was inclined to allow his chums to do all the planning and figuring while he busied himself by the fire; the four men glaring at him, and in turn reviling and entreating him to let them loose, as they had only been playing a practical joke on Colonel Morrison, since the cattle had been bought the day before and they thought to give him a scare.

But Billie paid no attention to either threats or blandishments, but went steadily about his self-appointed task of preparing a midnight supper for himself and companions, a congenial task it was too, as any one who knew Billie's weakness would easily understand. There was to be no sleep for the boys on this night, after the little they had enjoyed. They could not guess what the plans of the rustlers might be, and that in itself gave them cause for anxiety. If another lot of the Walkers should turn up before morning, and catch them napping, things would go hard with the youngsters. And then again, with prisoners of that type on their hands Donald and Adrian dared not relax their vigilance a particle lest one of the men manage to get loose, and freeing his mates, pounce upon their late captors.

Donald was used to sizing up cow-punchers, and

could see good in most any chap who followed that profession; but he had to admit that these four were about as hard looking specimens as he had run across for a long while. If they ever found a chance to turn the tables on the Broncho Rider Boys it was easy to guess how they would act. The thought did not afford Adrian any pleasure; but it did make him the more determined that he would neglect no precaution in order to make such a possibility less likely to happen.

Well, Billie finally called the others to sit down and have a bite of late supper; and more to oblige him than because they were really hungry they did eat a little. That satisfied the cook, however, and if his chums chose to partake so lightly of the fare, that only left the larger portion for him to make way with.

"What is the time?" asked Donald, when things had sort of simmered down to a condition of quiet, the prisoners ceasing to talk because they had come to realize that it was a useless expenditure of breath.

"Going on two now," was the answer.

"That means about four hours of it before us," said Donald; "well, we've got heaps to talk about, and can pass the time away all right. Then we must keep a lookout for signs of trouble, or the coming of any more rustlers, as well as watch this tough bunch."

"And," added the other, "if we have any extra

time we could put it in looking to see how the cattle are coming on close by here. If all's well in the morning we'll take the greatest pleasure in starting back for the ranch house, driving this lot of long-horns that carry the Bar-S brand."

Donald began chuckling at that.

"What do you find to laugh at?" asked Billie, who looked unusually sober for him.

"I was just thinking," replied the ranch boy, "what a tremendous surprise it'll be for Uncle Fred, yes, and Aunt Josie too, when they see us coming along whooping, with the lost herd in our charge. That would make a picture worth keeping, if only Billie here could snap it off, which he can't, more's the pity!"

CHAPTER XI.

LAYING PLANS.

"THERE'S one thing I don't understand," remarked Billie, after there had been a little interval of silence, while every one seemed to be busy with thoughts of his own.

"Better ease your mind, then, Billie, and let us hear what's bothering you," said Donald, with a smile; for he was used to the ways of his cousin, and knew that whenever anything did worry the fat

chum he had a regular bulldog method of keeping everlastingly at the matter until he had smoothed the tangle out, fairly well at least.

"Yes," added Adrian, "you know we're always willing to oblige you with whatever information we happen to have ourselves, so don't be bashful, Billie."

"Well, it's just this," and the other lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper, as though not wanting to take any chances of the prisoners catching a single word of what he meant to say, "what are we agoing to do with that crowd when morning comes along? Somebody give me the answer, please."

"Why, we don't want to be bothered with the lot any longer than we can help," Donald told him; "and that being the case we'll decide on how we'd better turn 'em loose, minus their guns, of course."

"Huh! that might mean you'd let 'em have their ponies, I reckon?" pursued Billie.

"Well, it's considered a cruelty out here on the plains to take a man's cayuse away from him," said Donald; "and because they're a pack of cattle rustlers hadn't ought to make us covet their mounts, I take it. See here, what's ailing you, Billie; you've sure got a bee in your bonnet right now? I hope you haven't got an eye on one of their hosses, that buckskin p'raps, and think it'd about be in your class?"

Billie shook his head slowly.

"You wrong me, Donald, sure you do," he observed, mournfully, as he gave his cousin a reproachful look; "I was only trying to do the thinking for the bunch for once. And I'll tell you what occurred to me if you want me to."

"Of course we do, old fellow, and we'll thank you for doing it, too!" exclaimed Adrian, warmly.

"Same here, Billie!" echoed the other chum.

"All right," Billie went on to say, still in that low, mysterious way; "then listen here, fellows. Now, it's going to take us quite some time to drive this lot of steers and cows back to where they came from, I take it?"

"Sure thing," remarked Adrian, encouragingly, when Billie stopped his explanation as though seeking confirmation of his statement.

"Well, supposing then, we turned these rustlers loose about the time we started, and gave 'em to understand we'd shoot the first fellow we saw dodging after us, what d'ye s'pose they'd be apt to do in that case? Why, make a bee-line for where they could find another batch of their breed, and fetch the whole gang awhooping after us. We might find a dozen or two tough punchers closing in on us long before we could get to the Bar-S Ranch buildings. How's that?"

"Say, there's a whole lot in what you say, Billie," admitted Donald, thoughtfully.

"And it's got to be threshed out while we sit here,

too," added Adrian. "I've a plan in mind right now that might fill the bill."

"Then for goodness' sake let's hear it!" begged Billie, eagerly.

"When we leave here in the morning we won't untie the rustlers at all, only one fellow, who can accompany us on our ride," pursued the owner of the ranch from which the cattle in the coulie had been stolen and stampeded.

"But hold on," remarked tender-hearted Billie, "wouldn't it be kind o' cruel to leave the lot here, tied hand and foot? What if nobody came along, and they had to just roll around here all the time? Say, it's *awful* to get hungry, and as for me I wouldn't want my worst enemy to be kept from his feed for even one whole day. I can't imagine any suffering so terrible; and you wouldn't think of trying such punishment even on cattle rustlers, would you, Adrian? They're human after all, even if they are bad men."

"You didn't let me finish what I was going to say, Billie," observed the ranch boy, quietly. "Didn't you hear me tell how we'd take one of them along on his pony, picking out the meekest of the bunch, if there's any choice about that, so we can make him help drive the cattle, and one of us could keep close to him all the time."

"Yes, yes, go on, please, Ad, I'm following you," said the fat chum.

"When we had gone far enough, miles and miles from here, so that we knew we'd soon strike the ranch buildings," continued Adrian, "why, then we could turn him loose, and let him gallop back here to set his pards free."

"Oh! I get on to what you mean!" declared Billie, admiringly; "by that time they just couldn't give us any bother, even if they did hurry away to find the rest of the ugly Walker crowd! That's a fine scheme of yours, Adrian. Ain't it funny now, with all my thinking that never came into my mind? But count on me agreeing with you, Adrian. It couldn't be bettered, no matter how much I badgered my head over the business. And Donald here says the same, don't you, old fellow?"

"I sure do that same," Donald was quick to say; "and I think that our chum has covered the ground the best ever."

"There's another thing I've decided on," Adrian went on to remark, encouraged by the success of his first proposition.

"Let's have it then," Billie begged him; "might as well hear all these bully ideas in a heap while we're ready to take a shock; and you do beat the world on thinking up things, Adrian, that's right."

"The very first chance I get I mean to send word to the sheriff of this county as the owner of Bar-S Ranch, and demand that he come to my place instanter with a posse behind him, ready to break up

this rustler business. Those cowboys told us a new sheriff had just taken office, and they kind of hoped he wouldn't be like the last one, right under the thumb of these terrible Walkers. Fact is, they seemed to have an idea he stood ready to do his duty the first time any ranchman got nerve enough to call on him to break the gang up. And I'm going to be that rancher to take the bull by the horns!"

He did not say this boastingly, nor was his voice elevated so that the listening prisoners might hear his words; but as he spoke there was a determined look on Adrian's face that told Donald, who knew him so well, he had never been more earnest in all his life than when he made this bold assertion looking to throwing down the glove of defiance to the Walkers.

"A great scheme, Adrian," Donald remarked, and his manner told even more than his few words.

"Don't talk louder than we are now," said Billie just then; "because I saw one of them fellows bob his head up like he was mighty curious to know what we had our heads together for."

The three Broncho Rider Boys continued to confer for some time longer. Billie was holding out manfully, but every now and then he would stretch his mouth in a dreadful way, as the irresistible impulse to yawn came upon him.

"Better lie down in your blanket, Billie," remarked Adrian, taking pity on the stout chum; be-

cause he knew Billie's failings, and sleeping was one of them.

"Yes," added Donald, who would rather see the other snuggled in the folds of his blanket than sitting there with his hands embracing his knees, thinking up a host of questions between yawns; "we'll do all that's necessary to keep things going; and if we have any need of your help, why we promise to call on you."

"Well," said Billie, "in that case p'raps I might take a few winks of sleep, because that gallop did kind of knock me up. But remember, I depend on your word of honor to give me a punch if I'm needed."

After that they heard nothing further from Billie, save an occasional heavy sigh resembling a snore, whenever he chanced to lie on his back. He was dead to the world in three minutes after lying down, with his warm blanket wrapped around his ample proportions, much after the manner in which he had seen Indians do at the quaint Zuni cliff dwellers' village in Arizona, visited by the three boys before coming up to Wyoming.

About half an hour after this Adrian thought they would do well to examine their prisoners, in order to make sure that their bonds were holding out securely. They did not profess to have had a great deal of experience in fastening up fellows, and during the time that had elapsed possibly one

of the men might have succeeded in gnawing his bonds partly through, or working them loose.

So Donald and Adrian took the flashlight torch, and went over each of the prisoners' bonds. They found them just as secure as when first triced up, which was to the credit of the young captors, to be sure.

The man whom they had decided must be the leader of the quartette, was staring hard at Adrian all the time the boys hovered over their prisoners. Evidently he must have begun to entertain certain suspicions with regard to the other.

"Say, hain't I seen ye before now, younker?" he finally asked, pointedly.

"I don't know," replied Adrian, "but I can't remember of ever meeting you, up to now."

"Might your name be Sherwood?" the other insisted; "and hain't ye the kid that years ago used ter ride 'round hyah on a calico pony, when the ole man was alive, an' ran Bar-S Ranch? I heard 'em call yuh Adreen a while ago, an' 'pears tuh me as how thet same war the name o' thet lively boy. Air you him?"

Adrian did not see fit to answer. He could not deny the accusation, and there would be no good end served in acknowledging it; though of course the man would construe his silence to mean assent, and understand things accordingly. But perhaps it might be as well that the Walkers knew the true

owner of Bar-S Ranch had come to town to take possession of his own, and clear up this strange tangle that seemed to have possession of his property, under Uncle Fred Comstock, who had taken to himself a wife, and she connected with the Walker tribe.

The boys went back to the dwindling fire, to sit the night out. They did not try to keep up much of a blaze, lest it serve to draw enemies to the spot; but sitting in the shadows, they held their rifles in readiness, and occasionally exchanged a few words as the minutes dragged slowly by.

Finally in the far east appeared the first faint streaks that told of coming day and the pair of weary watchers welcomed their arrival with positive relief, for it would mean a change, and action.

CHAPTER XII.

DRIVING THE STAMPEDED STOCK HOME.

“WAKE up, Billie; it’s breakfast time!”

Probably no other summons could have such an immediate effect upon the stout chum as this call. He instantly raised his head, and commenced to sniff the air.

“Coffee, and bacon frying in the bargain! Oh! I hope now I ain’t too late; and also that you’ve

cooked enough for all. Remember, we've got guests along with us; and you promised me you wouldn't let the rustlers go hungry, whatever else you did!" was what he exclaimed, as he crawled out of his snug retreat, and commenced to stretch vigorously, as well as rub his eyes in the bargain.

They assured him that after they had eaten, a second supply would be placed at his disposal to cook, while the others were up the coulie getting pointers on the lay of the land, and how best to start the herd out on the open again, when the time came to make a start.

With that Billie had to rest content. His words had been loud enough for the four prisoners to catch, and must have afforded them more or less relief; since they were doubtless hungry by now, and wondering whether the boys meant to keep them in that condition any length of time.

Having satisfied the inner man Adrian, accompanied by Donald, started up the ravine. Of course they took their guns along; and before leaving warned Billie that while he could cook some breakfast for the prisoners, under no condition was he to try and feed any of them until the others came back.

He promised this readily enough, for truth to tell Billie would not have particularly fancied untying the arms of one of those muscular fellows, lest he be taken off his guard, when there would be the mischief to pay.

The cattle were found to be grazing peacefully. They had apparently entirely recovered from the panic that accompanied the stampede, and when once driven out on the plain would naturally fall into old ways, and allow themselves to be urged on the back trail; for Adrian had concluded that they could do no better than to follow the plain marks made by the herd in fleeing.

When they got back to the fire they were met by Billie's declaration that he had the prisoners' breakfast ready, and if one of them would help him he could feed them by relays.

"I'll do that, because Donald's busy with something else," said Adrian.

Accordingly they started proceedings, and found it little trouble, since they only unfastened the arms of the prisoners, and these two at a time. The leader happened to be one of the second batch. He kept looking at Adrian as he ate ravenously; and it was evident he had about made up his mind that this must surely be the young owner of the Sherwood ranch.

Billie was more interested in the other fellow, who happened to be the glutton of that midnight meal. His enormous appetite still seemed to stay with him; and Billie, who claimed to be able to hold his own in the feeding line with most people, sat there, staring at the way the man disposed of the food, as though he might either be lost in admira-

tion, or else filled with dismay, perhaps taking a lesson.

"Here, you go slow there," he finally felt it his duty to say, warningly; "that's got to last you for some time, you know, because we're meaning to leave you here when we ride away. Don't gobble so, you pig! I eat a lot, but I do it decent-like, and not like a starving dog bolting his grub. Let up, I say, and get the good out of what you're swallowing!"

"You *are* the Sherwood boy, ain't you?" suddenly demanded the tall leader, as Adrian handed him his last allowance of coffee in the tin cup.

"Well, I suppose there's no use in my denying it, because I've managed to remember you now," remarked Adrian. "You used to ride for my father years ago; your name is Tad Whiffles; and you had to get away from Bar-S Ranch on account of your quarrelsome disposition. Yes, I'm the Sherwood kid you speak of; and I've come up from the Arizona ranch of my friend Donald Mackay, to find out what's all the matter with things up here."

The puncher called Tad Whiffles looked him over from head to foot; then he turned deliberately to the other stamper, and nodding his head, was heard to say:

"D'ye hear that, Corney? Tell me, won't there be high jinks to pay in these parts right soon now? I can see a warm session at Bar-S when the boy

owner comes acrost Josie, that was a Walker onct! Say, I'd give a heap tuh be there on the spot tuh see that same meetin', b'lieve me, Corney."

"Oh! things will all be straightened out after a bit," Adrian assured him in a confident fashion that caused the man to elevate his eyebrows, and mutter half under his breath:

"Blame me if I don't more'n harf think as how ye *kin* do the trick, if anybody kin, kid. The way ye follered us hyar, and took the hull crowd in makes me feel cheap. I don't know what ther ole man'll hev tuh say tuh us when he gets on tuh the story. But wait an' see how he comes out when *he* rubs up against yuh. But I sure would like tuh be at Bar-S for a bit when yuh arrives with all them steers. Wow! ain't thar agoin' tuh be somebody surprised, though?"

He shook his head, and relapsed into silence, as though the matter might be too big for him to grasp all at once.

So the two rustlers were once more securely pinioned. Adrian himself made sure that their bonds were tight, for he did not mean to have his plans spoiled by any fluke, if it could be avoided.

When they had packed things, and were all ready to start, Donald went to the man who was such a heavy eater, and whom they judged to be the most tractable of the lot.

"We're going to take you along with us, to help

drive the herd," he told him; and the fellow's face immediately took on a serious look.

"But what'll they do to me over at the Bar-S, if they git hands on me, pard?" he asked, uneasily. "That same old Comstock, if ever he *does* break away from under the thumb of his wife is sure agoin' to throw things around promiscuous like; and mebbe he'll begin by makin' me an awful lesson. Seems like I c'n feel the feathers asproutin' out all over me a'ready, 'case he'll git the tar heated, sure-pop. Say, there's Bemis as kin drive herd a heap better'n me any day agoin'. Hadn't ye sooner pick him to help out?"

"Oh! don't worry," remarked Donald as he cut the fellow's bonds; "get up now, and walk ahead of me. We don't mean to take you all the way, but along about noon we might send you back with the ponies belonging to your crowd."

"If that's a fact I don't mind ahelpin' drive," declared the man, with a relieved look on his face.

He might have thought that there would come a chance for him to slip away while chasing after the cattle; but if so he reckoned without his host; for Donald and Adrian were too smart to allow such an opening.

One of them kept close to the rustler all the while; and he was given plainly to understand that if he tried any such sneak game they would leave the cattle

to shift for themselves temporarily while they ran him down, and filled him full of lead.

The sight of the repeating rifles which all the Broncho Rider Boys carried, and handled as though they knew well how to use the same, filled him with a certain amount of respect; and if he had cherished any hopes of escaping they were kept carefully in restraint.

They had little trouble in getting the herd out of the coulie. The range boys knew just how to go about this sort of business; and when the rustler heard them yelling, and slapping their hats on their chaps as they started the feeding cattle, he knew that they were old hands at driving, even if young in years.

He did his part of the work all right, for he saw that this was the easiest way of getting on the good side of these energetic lads.

The three who were left behind called out, and told their captors they hoped they would not be forgotten in the shuffle; because before now cow-punchers had starved to death, or fallen victims to the hungry wolves that roamed the plains of nights.

Paying no further attention to them the boys chased after the moving herd, soon running along the back trail, with the drivers whooping, and dashing here and there to keep some stray animal from breaking away.

All went well, because both Adrian and Donald

made it a point that one of them keep close enough to the rustler driver to see that he was given no opportunity to escape. Billie's duty was not so much to drive, as to lead; in other words he had charge of the three cattle ponies belonging to the men who had been left bound in the camp at the mouth of Bittersweet Coulie; and which were to be generously turned over to Corney when they allowed him to depart, along about the middle of the day perhaps.

"I hope it's *before* lunch time that they let him go scot free," Billie was muttering to himself from time to time, as he frowned, and watched the evolutions of the puncher named Corney; possibly Billie had good reason for wishing this, since he happened to know that their rations had reached a rather low ebb by now; and if that enormous eater was invited to sit down with them at noon, and devour at will, what was going to become of those who had a better right to the "grub" than the rustler?

Some two hours after the start they discovered that several riders had headed in their direction. At first the boys were bothered a little, until they made the pleasing discovery that these were the same three friendly cow-punchers whom they had met on the previous day.

A sudden idea flashing into Adrian's mind, he made signals that he would like to talk with the trio. At that they turned directly, and came gallop-

ing along; for up to then it seemed they were inclined to sheer off, and mind their own business; because in these unsettled days it was not always the wisest thing to push up alongside those who were driving stock, lest they butt in on matters that were not intended to be known outside of certain Walker circles.

At discovering their young friends of the preceding day circling the herd that bore the brand of the Bar-S Ranch, the three punchers exchanged looks of intense surprise; and their wonder evidently took leaps and bounds when they also recognized in Corney a man of ill repute, who was known to be connected with the Walker crowd.

Adrian had rather fancied the three punchers, and meant to see if he could not offer them inducements to engage with him, as he feared he would need a new supply of men, when he started to weed out the Bar-S employees.

CHAPTER XIII.

ADRIAN HIRES MORE HELP.

"WE didn't reckon we'd meet up with you so soon again," remarked one of the cow-punchers, as, with his two companions, he drew in alongside Adrian; Donald at the time was "keeping tabs" on the rustler at some little distance away.

"And you're wondering your heads off right now," Adrian told him, with one of his rare smiles that made him so many friends, "what under the sun we're doing with this bunch of cattle. It's a long story, so I'll just say that we saw a stampede with four rustlers managing it, and chased after. We found them in camp at the mouth of Bittersweet Coulie, up which they had chased the herd, where they could change the brands in the morning, and drive the lot away to one of the Walker ranches. Well, we managed to make the four punchers our prisoners; and leaving three bound there, we're taking the other fellow part way along the back trail. When we got a few miles from the ranch buildings we thought we'd let him go back with the four ponies, so's to free his pards. That's the yarn in a nutshell, boys."

They stared at him, as though hardly able to believe their ears. It seemed incredible that three mere lads should have managed to get the better of a bunch of the Walker rustlers, men whom all honest punchers wanted as little to do with as possible.

Still, there were the cattle as positive evidence of the truth of Adrian's story, and they knew Corney, as well as his reputation, well enough.

"That beats anything I've heard tell of for many a day!" exclaimed one puncher, looking as though he might be ready to shout, and swing his hat in glee.

"First time them Walkers has been rubbed the wrong way for a hull year or more," added the second fellow in chaps and flannel shirt, and boots that sported enormous Mexican spurs; "fact is, ever since Fred Comstock took water, and quit fightin' 'em, an' that was after he married that sister of Hatch Walker's."

"He did used to be a fighter; but seems like his heart it's broke with havin' her hands in his hair so often; and he never lets out a yawp these days, no matter what happens. And say, them steers is got the Bar-S brand on right now; seems like they must a come from his place, the third lot he's lost in nine months."

"It's going to be the last, if I know anything about it!" declared Adrian; at which suggestive

words the three cow-punchers exchanged significant glances, and then the lanky fellow remarked:

"We doesn't mean to be personal, you know, stranger, but might we ask what that's got to do with you?" he went on to say.

"Only this," replied the boy, quickly; "they've been robbing me long enough, and I think it's about time this Walker gang was broken up, in the bargain. There's a new sheriff just come into office, I'm told, and as soon as I can get word to him I'm going to demand that he come to the Bar-S Ranch with a posse, to take some decided action. Perhaps, when they find out that there's something on foot, the other ranch owners around this part of the Wyoming range country will join in with me. Oh! I forgot that I hadn't introduced myself yet. I'm Adrian Sherwood, and it's my Uncle Fred Comstock you've been telling such queer stories about."

"Put her there, Adrian!" shouted the lanky puncher, thrusting out his hand. "I sure am proud to meet up with the son of a man that had such a good name as your dad. And if what you've started in to do is a sign of what's goin' to happen here, I reckons as how the Walkers'll hev to walk purty soon, eh, boys?" and he turned to nod his head at his comrades.

These two were just as desirous of shaking hands

with young Sherwood as the lanky fellow had been; and Adrian liked them more than ever.

"I've been surprised at the bad returns I've been getting a long while now, from Uncle Fred," he went on to say, "and made up my mind to run along here from Arizona, where I was visiting my friend Donald Mackay, on his father's ranch, just to find out for myself what was going on."

"Then Comstock nor his big wife don't suspicion that you're around, is that it, Adrian?" exclaimed the thin puncher, grinning as though vastly pleased.

"The first they'll know about it," the other went on to say, "will be this afternoon when we come driving this recovered herd back home. One of the three men we left at the mouth of the coulie said he'd give something to be on hand when that took place, just to see what happened."

"You bet I would, too!" declared the lanky puncher; "and my pards here would be tickled to death if they could see what *she* looks like when you kim aridin' along, drivin' your own cattle back home, which she expects are carryin' the Walker brand by this time."

"Sure we would!" burst out the other two, eagerly.

"All right, then, you can see that sight if you'll engage with me for a year at the regular wages, and agree to stand back of me!" observed Adrian,

thinking the time had come to strike while the iron was hot.

"D'ye mean that, Adrian Sherwood?" asked the other, after he had caught affirmative nods from both his companions.

"Just what I do!" was the reply the ranch boy gave. "I expect there'll have to be an overhauling of the pay roll when I take the reins in my own hands; because of course some of the punchers at the ranch will be Walker sympathizers, put there to cow the rest. My uncle will know those he can trust, and the rest must go; so you see I'll need a few good trusty fellows to back me up. What do you say?"

"It's a go!" exclaimed the lanky puncher, as he again thrust out his hand; "for it happens just now that we're lookin' for a job, as our boss sold out his ranch business, and the new man brought his own crowd along with him. We even thought of hiking over to Bar-S to see what chance there might be there; but since that Walker crowd has been runnin' things up yonder none of us kinder like the idea of hitchin' up with Mr. Comstock. But since you've come, and mean to do things like you say, why, we'll throw in with you, sure we will, Adrian."

That pleased the other more than he could find words to say.

"Then let's call it a bargain, and first chance we

get we'll put the same down in writing so there'll be no mistake. And now tell me what your names might be."

The lanky one gave his as George Hess; the little "sawed-off" announced himself as Andy Hickenlooper; while the last puncher declared that he would respond to any name, especially when the cook was pounding on a frying-pan with a big spoon to announce dinner; but that if he had to sign any legal document he believed he could swear to the fact that he had once been called Septimus Green, shortened to plain Sep.

It was determined that they might carry the rustler along for a few more miles and then send him about his business, with the other ponies in his charge. To be sure, the news would thus be carried to the Walker headquarters in due time; but long ere that could happen Adrian expected to have reached the ranch with his cattle, so that it did not matter much anyhow.

Of course Adrian felt it his immediate duty to inform his chums of his good fortune in making arrangements with such a husky lot of punchers, and ones they had particularly fancied when they met them before.

So he had George keep the rustler under his eye, while he called Donald and Billie to him, to explain the situation. No doubt the boys had partly guessed the truth as soon as they heard those yells, and saw

the three newcomers swing out to start driving the herd; but all the same it sounded fine to them as Adrian spun the story.

"Great work, old chum!" exclaimed Billie, approvingly; "and already the atmosphere up around these diggings seems different. The punchers think so; and say, wouldn't it be a *stupendous* thing now if our coming started the ranchers to getting their pluck back, so that they'd rise up, and chase this old Walker tribe out of Wyoming. Hope that's what's going to happen, you hear me talking, boys!"

When Billie was pleased his round red face fairly beamed with the smile that came so easily upon it. It was a catching smile, too, and many times those who saw the same just had to chime in from sheer sympathy.

For some time longer the drive went on, and they must have covered more than half of the territory over which the stampeded cattle had chased on the preceding night. As yet there was not the first sign of any pursuit on the part of the punchers connected with the raided ranch; as George Hess said, they were "lying down, like whipped dogs, and letting things go as they pleased, because it wouldn't do any good if they did want to follow the thieves, with that woman holding her thumb on Fred Comstock so that he didn't dare call his soul his own these days, without dodging."

Adrian began to recognize numerous marks in the landscape. He knew that in not more than another couple of hours they ought to arrive at their destination, unless something not down on the bills happened to interfere; which could only come from a meeting with a large bunch of the Walker punchers, and consequent war.

Billie was eagerly waiting to hear one of his chums remark that it was time they turned the rustler loose. He was beginning to get uneasy, under the dreadful fear that this dismissal might be delayed so long that they would have to feed the fellow again, and that Billie believed would be a misfortune in many ways.

Finally he saw Adrian beckon the rustler, and head him toward where Billie had the three ponies belonging to the prisoners of Bittersweet Coulie trailing along after him. That could only mean one thing, the sending of Corney about his business, and allowing him to gallop back to release his unfortunate companions.

"Here's your ponies," Billie called out, after he had heard Adrian tell the fellow he was at liberty to ride away; "and don't forget that we treated you white on this trip. I only hope that if ever I have the misfortune to be held a prisoner among your crowd that you'll see to it I don't starve; because I always did say there was no death I dreaded

more than going without my regular allowance of grub."

But nobody was listening to Billie talk. The rustler had taken the bridles of the ponies and without a word turned to gallop away. Once he did turn in his saddle to shake his clenched fist back at the boys, and then immediately duck down until he lay flat along the neck of his mount, half fearing lest one of them answer his challenge with a shot from his rifle.

But such a thing did not occur to any one of the three chums. They were really too glad to see the ugly-faced Corney depart to think of trying to detain him a minute longer than seemed absolutely necessary; and least of all would Billie have put out a restraining hand, because it was nearly noon, and lunch time.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAME PILGRIM ON THE TRAIL.

"THERE'S a cowboy riding this way, and seems like he might have come from your place, too, Adrian!" Donald called out, soon after they had let the rustler depart.

"It must be some messenger Uncle Fred's sending to town, perhaps with a letter to me, telling about this new outrage, and that he'll just have to

throw up his job here, and clear out, since he's powerless to help things," the other suggested; as he watched the lone rider drawing near, evidently more than curious at discovering the lately stampeded bunch of cattle heading back toward the ranch house.

Upon being signalled he headed for them, and soon came riding up, his eyes round with wonder as he surveyed the six who constituted the drivers of the cattle.

"Hello! Frank," called out George Hess, who seemed to know the other; "reckon as how you're struck next door to dumb awonderin' what all this means; but I'll leave it to the boss here to explain. This same is Frank Bowker, Adrian, and about as decent a puncher as the ole man's got left on the place. Reckon that's why he's asendin' of him to town right now on business."

"Is that where you're bound, Frank?" asked Adrian; "perhaps you'll think I've got no right to ask, but you see, I'm the owner of the Bar-S Ranch, and my name's Sherwood."

The puncher's puzzled face was quickly wreathed in a grin, and as rapidly as he could speak he declared that he was mighty glad to meet up with Mr. Sherwood; and that it sure looked as though he had got busy the very first thing he arrived, in recovering the bunch of cattle that the rustlers had run off in a stampede.

Of course Adrian quickly gave him such facts as he deemed the other should know.

"And we're going to clean up things here, Frank, remember that," the boy wound up by saying in a quiet but positive way that made the others smile again, and act as though they would like to shake hands all around. "Are you really going to town for Uncle Fred; and if so would you take a written message to the new sheriff for me?"

"Will I?" burst out the other, excitedly; "say, you just try me, that's all. And I'll see that he gets the same as sure as I live. And I'll tell him the time's come at last for something to be done to round up that Walker crowd. We've stood for it too long already; and say, I'm just tickled to death to know there's a real change acomin'. Wisht I could go back with you; mebbe I wouldn't give my best pair of boots to be on hand when *she* larns who you are, and sees them steers adrivin' right home to the Bar-S corrals. Wow! it'll be some sight, believe me."

But Adrian soon convinced Frank that it was his duty to get along to town as speedily as possible, so as to find the new sheriff, and place the letter he, Adrian would write, in his hands.

It took only a short time to prepare the communication, though the boy tried to explain the situation, and impress on the peace officer how necessary it was for him to lose no time in summoning a re-

liable posse, and riding out to the ranch house of the Bar-S outfit; for there was likely to be war around that section shortly, since the Walkers must fight before they would acknowledge defeat.

When Frank started away, waving his hat above his head, and shouting as only an excited range rider can, Adrian declared he felt a thousand per cent better.

"It's all going to come out right in the end, Donald," he told his chum.

"But before we get there it's likely we'll see some rocky times," admitted the other, though his manner gave no evidence that the fact was causing him any particular uneasiness; for Donald had been brought up on a ranch, and often found himself confronted by difficulties that would have daunted any ordinary lad, but which he took boldly by the horns, and usually succeeded in getting the better of.

Once more they were on the way, and the boys began to look forward to the noisy greeting they might expect when they drove the herd up to the ranch house. Adrian had not forgotten how things looked around there, even though he had been absent for years; and he could picture Uncle Fred, his new wife, and the punchers connected with the place gathered in a big group, and staring at them while they rounded-up their charges, and drove

them to the stock corral for safely, until things had simmered down somewhat.

"There's another fellow on foot ahead of us, and he seems to be staggering along like he might be hurt some, Adrian," Donald remarked, as he dashed over to where the other chum was riding along with Billie, content to leave much of the driving to the three punchers.

"Well, let's strike off, and see who he is, and what's happened to him," suggested Adrian, when he had located the object mentioned by Donald, and saw that if they kept directly on after the cattle they would not come within half a mile of the foot traveler.

Accordingly the three started on a gallop. The man saw them coming, and halted in his limping manner of locomotion to watch them, even waving a hand as if wanting to show by this salute that he was friendly, and hoped they were the same.

As they bore down upon him they saw that he was a rather forlorn looking chap. He might be called middle-aged, but his face was thin, and seemed to have a perpetual look of alarm and dread stamped upon it. When he got to talking the least thing would cause him to give a jump, and look hastily around as though he feared lest the heavy hand of the law was about to descend on his bony shoulder.

Still, he did not look at all like a bad man, and

Adrian really felt more or less pity for the wretch, who was evidently footsore and weary, perhaps hungry in the bargain.

"What brings you away off here without a mount?" he asked, as the three of them sat in their saddles, and surveyed the old fellow.

"Oh! I had a hoss, all right, but he was that old and played-out that he just laid down on me, and gave up the ghost some miles back," the man told them; "I've been hoofing it ever since; and as I'm lame it's been a hard job for me. Never got over a little trouble I had two years back further south, a shooting scrape, though it was forced on me, gents, I assure you. Could you help me get to some ranch, where I might strike a job? I'm a master-hand at figures, and could keep the books for my board. If you leave me here I'm about ready to lie down, and give up the hull business. I'm that played out."

Adrian did not altogether know that he was doing right, but he could not bear to see a wretched being suffer. And there was Billie, ready to chime in and add his entreaties to those of the foot traveler. Besides, as has been said before, the fellow looked absolutely harmless; and had evidently been his own worst enemy in the past, having a weakness for strong drink, Adrian suspected.

"Well, it would be hard to leave you here," he said; "and perhaps my horse wouldn't mind carry-

ing double. It's only for a short distance, anyway; and perhaps, who knows but what Uncle Fred might be glad to get some one to keep his books, when his board is all he asks. What's your name?"

"Thomas," the other started to say, and then paused for some reason; so that very naturally Adrian supposed he meant this was his last name.

"Well, see if you can climb up here then, Mr. Thomas; and hold on to me. We don't expect to make fast time, and it'll be better than walking, anyway."

The dilapidated scarecrow hastened to avail himself of this opportunity. Already the forlorn look on his emaciated face was beginning to give way to one of hope.

"This is right kind of you, sir," he said as he managed to get seated, with the assistance of the rider, though Ten Spot pranced more or less, as though to let them know he did not wholly approve of this double burden business; "and later on, if you could only manage to give me a few bites of food I'd be so thankful, because to tell you the honest truth I haven't eaten a bite since noon yesterday."

At that Billie was heard to give vent to a groan. Whether this was forced from his lips at the prospect of another hungry mouth to feed, or because he could sympathize with any one who was compelled to go without breaking his fast for such a

length of time, it might be hard to say; though the latter seemed to be nearer the truth, judging from the way he began to search through his pockets until he had found a package wrapped in paper, which he thrust into the hand of Adrian's passenger with the remark:

"That's a piece of dried venison I've been carryin' all the while, to keep body and soul together in case I ever got lost again on the desert or the prairie. But you're welcome to it, Mr. Thomas. Don't swallow it in lumps, because you had ought to grind your food first, and that pemmican is tough stuff. But it'll keep you busy, and p'raps I'll find a chance to cook something when that's gone."

"Bless your kind heart, my boy!" muttered the man, who was already tearing the paper off, so as to get busy with the piece of dried meat, upon which Billie had been secretly nibbling between meals, to "stay his stomach," as he would say.

The herd had gotten some distance away, but the boys experienced no trouble in catching up again. As the three cow-punchers had their hands full keeping the cattle from breaking away, now that they were once more on familiar fields, they paid no attention to the newcomer. And Thomas was so savagely munching the tough dried meat that he did not seem to notice them.

A short time later the boys announced that they would stop alongside of a stream, let the cattle

graze for a while, and get something to eat themselves. In spite of Billie's vivid fears there was plenty of provisions left for all hands, even including the latest edition to the force.

Adrian noticed that Thomas hesitated when the three punchers came in after Billie had called to them that lunch was ready. He seemed to scan each face as if he feared lest there might be some one who would know him; and the boy fancied it was a look of relief that swept over the wrinkled countenance of the lame man when he made sure that he had nothing to fear in that line.

"There's something queer about this Thomas," Adrian told himself; "he's been in a peck of trouble somewhere, and is afraid of somebody; because he's forever looking around, and starts every time any one speaks. But he isn't the kind to be afraid of, and he sure does need helping along. I'll take him as far as the ranch house, anyway, and see what Uncle Fred can do for him."

And with that he forgot all about the man for the time being, because there were so many other important things that came crowding into his mind.

After lunch they again mounted, Donald now taking the lame pilgrim up behind him for a change; and when the punchers had started the herd along, the journey toward Bar-S Ranch was resumed, with a prospect that another hour might see them bringing up at their destination.

CHAPTER XV.

FACE TO FACE AT THE CORRAL.

It appeared that that fine lunch had made the lame man feel a thousand per cent better. The coffee had gone to the right spot, and warmed up his heart, so that he really looked like a different man.

At the same time it developed that Thomas was something of a master-hand at talking, just as he claimed to be with figures. As he rode there behind Donald he kept up a perpetual flow of chattering, and his own adventures in the past, "further south," as he described it, made up the main theme.

It seemed as though he had indeed been through a heap of trouble, and so far as his accounts went, he was never to blame for the distressing things that happened to him. A ruffian had waylaid him, and robbed him of his hard-earned savings, besides badly using him, so that he was still lame. Then back of that he had been set upon by a band of outlaws, who made him a prisoner, gave it out that he was dead, and for a whole year and more he had been forced to wait on them in their mountain cave, a regular slave.

He entertained Donald with a glowing account of how he had finally managed to stupefy the whole band with some drug he found among their plunder, and in this fashion made his escape. How much of this was true, and what portion ought to be laid to the fancy of an overwrought brain the boy could not tell. He simply put the fellow down as a timid man who liked to boast of things he claimed to have accomplished in the past, which could not be proven either way.

And Donald, too, believed that Thomas was a harmless fellow, given to boasting somewhat, perhaps, or telling extravagant tales about himself, but not at all dangerous.

In turn the other managed to ask a few questions concerning what their intended destination might be like. He had heard about Mr. Comstock being a generous man, and had started out to see if he could not find employment at the Bar-S Ranch. And if these young gentlemen happened to have a personal acquaintance with the manager of the place perhaps they might say a good word for him.

When he learned that Adrian was really the sole owner of the ranch the pilgrim entreated Donald to urge his chum to think kindly of a poor wretch who had been so long the football of fate.

Donald said he would, and hoped thus to get the other to stop talking; but now it was a shower of thanks which continued to fall from the lips of

Thomas; who vowed again and again that never during the course of a long and adventurous career had he chanced to run across three such fine young fellows as these with whom his fortunes seemed bound up.

Tired at last of the everlasting flow of language Donald told the man to stop talking, as he had some very important details to figure out; and this apparently warned Thomas that he had better forego the pleasure of detailing other wonderful happenings which had come to him in the past; for he certainly did fall into a condition of silence.

A shout from Billie announced that the ranch buildings had been sighted ahead. This caused Donald and Adrian to dash on ahead of the cattle, for they wanted to be in a position to see all that went on.

As the bound rustler had said, likewise Frank Bowker, when he wished he might have an opportunity of witnessing their arrival, there was liable to be something interesting doing about that time.

Already looking far ahead they could see that the news of their coming must have percolated among the ranch buildings, and the bunk houses; for mounted punchers were dashing this way and that, as though greatly excited, and unable to understand what had happened to bring the lost herd trailing home. Those rustlers had never before

been known to let loose their grip on a bunch of cattle, once they stampeded the same.

Nearer they pushed, so that it was now easy to hear the yells of the boys, who would ride out toward them, take a good look, and then gallop madly back toward the buildings as though pursued by a prairie fire.

"Looks like they just couldn't believe their eyes," remarked Billie, who was of a certainty enjoying the prospect of some excitement ahead, and trying to settle in his mind whether or not there would be a fight then and there between their little company and those of the Bar-S punchers who were really in the pay of the Walker gang, and doing about as they pleased, while the "missus" kept the little manager under her thumb.

"And this is only the beginning of the row!" declared Donald, grimly. "Wait till the lady comes out to see what all the racket means; and around that time there'll be excitement worth talking about. She may have your Uncle Fred nailed down where she wants him, because he's her husband, and she's taught him to do what she tells him; but it's going to be a different thing when the owner of the ranch happens along. Whew! ain't they worked up to top-notch speed, though?"

"I'm trying to figure out in my mind," remarked Adrian, "just from seeing how those punchers act, which of them are with the Walker crowd, and

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which can be depended on to back me up, if it comes to choosing a boss."

"And how do you make out?" asked Donald, eagerly; "will the big end swing for or against us, do you believe, Adrian?"

"So far," replied the other, "as well as I can tell from here, it's about an even toss-up all around. Where one puncher looks scowling and mad, there's another ready to throw his hat up, and yell with joy at seeing the long-horns coming back, when everybody counted them lost for keeps."

"But none of them suspect that you're here?" interposed Billie.

"Of course not; how could they, when even my uncle is resting under the belief that Adrian Sherwood is right now away down under the hot sun of Arizona, hanging his hat on a peg in the Keystone Ranch building."

"You don't see him yet, do you, Adrian, or the lady either, for that matter?" continued Billie, wild with impatience to witness that remarkable meeting when his chum would come face to face with the once strong-minded manager of the cattle ranch, but who was now a slave to petticoat rule as instituted by the sister of Hatch Walker, known at the time of her second marriage as the Widow Smeed.

"Not yet, but soon," replied the other, who was

rising in his stirrups, the better to see what was transpiring.

The trio of punchers who had been hired by Adrian to assist him in his work of reconstruction at Bar-S Ranch went about their business of shunting the cattle into the corrals as though they had worked here for years, and knew all the ropes; but then it was all a part of their stock in trade, and one ranch is pretty much like another, wherever cattle are raised for the market.

A couple of fellows belonging to the place took it upon themselves to lend a hand at turning the herd in at the proper moment, and by their actions informed Adrian that they were overjoyed to see the way things had turned out. He marked them down in his mind, and felt that here were a pair of worthy punchers, at least, on whom he might depend for aid when the time for choosing came.

Adrian also noticed that as they worked these fellows were forever twisting their heads around, and shooting anxious looks in the direction of the ranch house, just as though they anticipated an eruption at any moment now, when affairs might be brought around to a crisis.

He wished he could only get a chance to inform them who he was, and make sure that they would stand by him when the explosion came. How Uncle Fred would act was altogether uncertain, as yet. Adrian remembered him as a fiery little man

who could look furious when he wanted, and was deemed utterly fearless when it came to facing a leveled gun in the hand of a desperate cattle thief; but then that was a different thing to standing up before a screaming, angry woman, whom he dared not lay a hand on because of the fact that she was a member of the other sex; while at the same time she was privileged, as his lawful spouse, to scratch and pound him to her heart's content.

Perhaps it was strange that with all this racket taking place those in the ranch house had not issued forth as yet, to ascertain what it meant. But then cowboys are nearly always such a noisy set that one becomes accustomed to their wild whooping and yelling, and pays little attention to a sudden outburst of that kind.

But Billie knew it could not last.

"There, I saw a fellow skoot inside the house right then, Adrian!" he suddenly cried; "and chances are he'll hand 'em the information that the stampeded herd is safe back again. If that glorious news don't fetch 'em out on the licketty-split run then I don't know beans. Just you watch and see what's going to happen! Hey! see that, would you? I guess now that little fellow might be your one-time *fe-rocious* Uncle Fred, what's been sat down on by the woman's rights rule. See him shade his eyes with his hand, and stare at the cattle, as if he reckoned he might be plumb locoed. And

now he's started on the full run this way, to find out what happened. They never had a stolen bunch of stock come back before, you see; and that's what makes 'em crazy over it. It seems too good to be true, to some of these fellows; while others are looking as black as the inside of my hat, and saying all sorts of bad things among themselves. Here he comes, Adrian; now get ready to push back the brim of your hat, and let Uncle Fred recognize you!"

Adrian was hardly listening to all these excited remarks on the part of the fat chum. With Donald close beside him, still mounted on his pony, he awaited the coming of the ranch manager, now running swiftly toward the spot where they had halted.

"And there she sprints after him!" gasped Billie; "oh! my! now mebbe we are going to see high jinks? Here, hold on, Mr. Thomas, what you sliding out like that for? They won't hurt you, so long as my chum says you can stay!"

But the man they had picked up on the trail did not seem to fancy the looks of things, for he made the utmost haste to limp over to the nearest bunk house, around which he hurried so as to lose his identity in the crowd that was gathering.

Mr. Comstock was small, but he had a fierce look, with his white mustache and goatee, and bold features; only when his wife spoke was he ever known to tremble and throw out the white flag of surrender.

"Here, what's all this mean?" he called out, sternly, as he came up. "Who brought these cattle back again? I want to thank him for it, no matter who says I hadn't ought to," with a quick, nervous glance behind him, though just at the moment the advancing figure of the woman was concealed by a group of interested cow-punchers.

And as he kept on advancing toward those who were seated in their saddles, the manager of the Bar-S Ranch suddenly looked into the face of Adrian Sherwood!

CHAPTER XVI.

A THREATENING STORM.

THE fierce looking small man with the shock of white hair, and the air of a Buffalo Bill, stood there as though riveted to the spot, and stared at the smiling face of Adrian.

As a result of figuring things out the boy had come to the conclusion that his relative must be a victim of circumstances, and too much wife; therefore he was in a frame of mind not to judge him too harshly until he could get a grasp on the real situation.

And that was one reason why he smiled, and extended his hand. Besides, he had not forgotten

that in times past he had been very fond of his mother's only brother; and that indeed once the other had actually saved his life, when a crazed broncho had attacked the small lad in the corral, and would likely have trampled him underfoot only for the coming of Uncle Fred, who had seized upon the beast with his bare hands, and wrestled with him, until a puncher arrived and shot the animal dead.

"Hello! Uncle Fred! How are you?" called out Adrian, cheerily. "I just happened along in time to take back some of your stock that the rustlers had stampeded. You're glad to see me, of course you are, even if the surprise is so great that you haven't found a chance to say so yet."

Then Uncle Fred beamed upon him, and rushing forward seized the outstretched hand eagerly. For the moment all else was forgotten save that he saw his nephew in the flesh before him, and the old affection again assumed sway.

"Adrian, my dear boy, is it really you?" he exclaimed, quivering all over with pleasure, as he wrung the hand of the boy; then like a flash some terrible thought seemed to fly through his mind, for he lost his color, and there came into his eyes a troubled look.

"Well, what I've been dreading for months has come on me at last," he went on to say, with a gasp. "But all the same I'm glad to see you, glad

that this agony of mind will now be over. But you will despise me, my boy, when you learn how I've lost all my independence. How has the mighty fallen, to be tied to the apron strings of a woman! Just this very day I had resolved after this last blow to end it all by flight. I believed I could not stand it any longer, and keep my mind. But your unexpected coming has changed all that; and now I'll stick it out; yes, I'll stay to give you an account of my unjust stewardship; and then gladly take the consequences, whatever they may be."

He poured this out swiftly, in a low tone meant only for the ear of the boy who had by now jumped from his saddle, and was standing close beside his uncle.

Adrian was not in the least surprised. He had expected just this very thing, and the facts simply corroborated his suspicions.

How his old bachelor uncle had been coaxed into marrying, he could not understand, but it had happened; and evidently he had yoked up with a mind that was even stronger than his own. As constant dripping water will wear away a stone in time, so by degrees had Mr. Comstock come under the subjection of his wife. Doubtless he had rebelled fiercely at first, but slowly he had found himself compelled to give in, sometimes only after a pitched battle, until now much of his once vaunted bravery was gone, and in her presence he trembled.

It was almost pitiable, and Adrian felt very sorry for Uncle Fred. At the same time he was determined that he would not fall under the same sway; and that if it was at all possible he would oust this woman from the position she had assumed as boss of the manager of Bar-S Ranch.

"I think I understand it all, Uncle," he said, hastily, yet with such a vein of sympathy in his voice that the man started, and seemed to catch a little new courage. "And while I'm here I mean to see if something can't be done to remedy matters. By the greatest good luck in the world we managed to get back this bunch of cattle that was stolen last night. There were four of the rustlers in camp at Bittersweet Coulie; and only three of us boys, but we took them by surprise, made them prisoners, and here you see the missing herd, with only one steer lacking."

Mr. Comstock's eyes showed the astonishment he felt.

"You did all that, my dear Adrian, and you only three boys?" he ejaculated. "Well, the Sherwood blood will tell every time. I'm glad you've come, no matter what happens to me. It had got to the breaking point anyway, and to-night I meant to run away. Oh! what I have gone through with, nobody can ever know; but this marks the beginning of the end, I seem to feel it, and welcome it. When you kick us off the place perhaps she won't

want to cling to me any longer, and I will be free to go, and start afresh some place where they don't know me. But introduce me to your friends, Adrian. I hope I haven't sunk so low but that I'd be proud to shake the hands of such brave fellows"

Poor old Uncle Fred was trying his best to appear something like himself; but it is very hard for a man who has been made the cringing slave of a virago to seem at all dignified; he was so in the habit of looking quickly around as though expecting a blow that it would have been comical had it not at the same time seemed quite sad, especially to Adrian, who had known how proud and consequential a strut Uncle Fred used to have in other days.

"This is my chum, Donald Mackay, about whom I've written you often," the boy went on to say; "and this other is his cousin, Billie Winkle."

Mr. Comstock gravely shook hands with each of them. He was not aware that from behind a bunch of the punchers his wife was watching them like a hawk, for she managed to keep herself concealed from view, while she listened and looked, evidently sizing the situation up, and deciding what all this row meant, with the missing herd back under the charge of a pack of strange punchers, too.

"I chanced to run across three cowboys who were out of employment, since the man they had

worked for sold his ranch; and taking a fancy to the lot I engaged them to work for me. They are reliable, honest fellows, who will stand back of me; for I reckoned, you see, Uncle, that there might be a few punchers here that wouldn't care to stay—after I came!"

He lowered his voice when saying this. Perhaps, after all, Adrian may have known of the presence of his uncle's wife back of the group; or else he did not mean to let his plans be known to every Tom, Dick and Harry.

Apparently Mr. Comstock grasped the situation, reading between the lines. He must have known that there were employees on the ranch devoted more to the service of his wife, and her relatives, the Walkers, than they were to the interests of the owner of Bar-S; and that if Adrian meant to stay and assume charge of his own property he would have to fire these unworthy punchers the first thing.

How wise he had been then to make sure of having reliable fellows to step into the places that would thus be made vacant. Uncle Fred saw that the boy was surely able to plan, and also carry out his arrangements. It might be different when he found himself up against a woman's wits; but he began to have hopes that the reign of petticoats was nearly at an end in connection with Bar-S Ranch.

The more the boy saw of his uncle the greater

became his conviction that he had allowed these things to go on not because he was dishonest in the least; but that he had been brought in deadly fear of the woman who had become his wife.

Adrian was more bent than ever on changing all these things. He hoped that there would appear a way whereby he might buy the woman off; but if she refused to treat with him on these terms, then Uncle Fred too would also have to shake the dust of Bar-S Ranch off his boots, because the last bunch of cattle had been rustled from that place, Adrian felt sure.

"Later we'll talk these matters all over, Uncle," he went on to say; "and I'm hoping to see a way where everything can be arranged to bring back the old times again. Take courage, and perhaps everything will be well."

The little man who had been such an aggressive character in his day, heaved a tremendous sigh.

"Oh! happy days they were; and do you know, Adrian, sometimes it seems to me a million years must have dragged by since then, I have suffered such torments, such shame. I was the greatest fool that ever walked on two legs. But she caught me by a smart trick, and almost before I knew it I was promising to love and cherish her for life, before a preacher. But oh! what a time I've had! It would have been bad enough with her vixenish temper; but when I learned that she was a sister to **that**

rustler, Hatch Walker, it nearly finished me. Things have gone from bad to worse. She's nearly killed me several times; and as I was just telling you, when I learned that a third bunch of cattle had disappeared last night; and she refused to let me go out in search of them with some of the boys, saying it was useless, I just made up my mind it was going to be three times and out for me. Then you came, and now the sky begins to lighten. Perhaps things *will* take a change. Perhaps even I may feel more like my old self again, and find it in me to defy her. Thank you over and over, my boy, for what you have said. Oh! I only hope you don't fall under her influence the same way I did."

"Don't fear for me, Uncle Fred," said the boy, in the same low tone the other had been using; "but we'll soon see how things are going to turn out, for there she comes this way right now!"

"Oh! is that so?" said the manager of the ranch, with a sudden vibration in his voice; then, realizing that he had just been saying how brave he felt again, he seemed to pull himself together, drew his small but soldierly figure up straight in a sort of Napoleon-like attitude, Adrian thought, and with a white yet determined face awaited the breaking of the storm.

There were others among the cow-punchers who shrank back, rather appalled by the angry look on the strong features of the large woman who ad-

vanced straight toward the spot where her husband and the three boys stood. Donald found his attention attracted toward the corner of the near-by bunk house, and around which the man they had picked up on the trail was staring. And Donald must have concluded that Mr. Thomas was pretty much of a craven, despite all those stories he had told in connection with his past adventures "further south;" for there was certainly a look of extreme fear written large upon his wrinkled face right then and there, as though he might have known himself what it was to be domineered over by a husky female, and the sight of Mrs. Fred's flushed face and sparkling eyes brought up very unpleasant memories in the old chap's mind.

CHAPTER XVII.

ADRIAN TAKES THE REINS.

"WHO might these boys be, Fred?"

The woman asked this question with a lofty air, as she arrived close to where the three chums now stood, holding the bridles of their horses.

"This is my nephew, Adrian Sherwood, who as you know, Josie, is the owner of Bar-S Ranch; and these are his friends, Donald Mackay, about whom

he has often written to me, and Billie Winkle," Mr. Comstock hastened to say, though it could be seen that he had to summon all his resolution to the fore in order to keep his voice firm.

She looked the three over from head to foot, and in particular Adrian. Evidently Mrs. Fred scented trouble, since the young owner of the ranch that was being systematically robbed by her blood relatives had come on the ground. But she was game, and scorned to show the white feather, though she may have suspected that this marked the beginning of the end of the reign of Hatch Walker and his crowd in that favored section.

"I happened to hear something that was said as I came up," she went on to remark, caustically; "it was about their recovering the cattle that wandered away last night. So you see your fears were useless after all. You always worry over things without any reason, just like an old fool would."

"But it happened, my dear," Uncle Fred spoke up, "that in this case the rustlers *did* carry off the herd; for Adrian and his chums made four of them prisoners, and recovered the cattle at Bittersweet Coulie."

"What's that you're telling me?" she demanded, scornfully; "three half-grown boys capture four husky rustlers. More than likely they found the cattle astray, and are playing a joke on you by telling such a story as this," and the laugh that ac-

accompanied these words made Billie shiver as though a sudden draught from the Artic regions had struck him in the back.

"Perhaps we did dream it," chuckled Adrian; "but if so, it's queer how we came to get it in our heads that one of the stampedeers was named Tad Whiffles, another Corney, and still a third Bemis. But no matter, madam, we did bring the cattle back, and here they are, safe and sound. Uncle Fred is delighted with such good luck; and of course you must be the same."

The woman was looking at him keenly. Perhaps she realized that this was no ordinary boy, whom she could badger in the same way she had his uncle. The mentioning of those three names, which of course she recognized as belonging to punchers in her brother's employ, told her that they must indeed have done all they claimed; and such boys who did things were certainly to be looked on with respect. Still she was not ready to abdicate the position she had held so long.

She turned on Uncle Fred, as though pretty sure of a cringing victim there.

"Who are these three strange riders I see? Did they help drive the lost herd home? When have you taken to hiring new hands without consulting me? Didn't we settle that matter once for all months ago?"

The manager of Bar-S Ranch stood his ground.

He had summoned the last vestige of his former resolution to the front, and seemed ready to try conclusions with the wife of his bosom again, perhaps for the last time.

"I have had nothing to do with hiring them, my dear," he said, firmly. "Adrian made all arrangements himself, and you know, as he is the sole owner of the ranch, what he says goes. He thought there would be several of our boys who might not wish to remain, and work under him; and so he brought these new hands along to take their places when they were paid off."

She looked as black as midnight at that. Donald, watching closely, realized that Mrs. Fred must guess that they understood how matters were, and had come prepared to oust her crowd, even if they had to include Uncle Fred and herself.

"Oh! that's how the land lies, is it?" she went on to say, bitterly. "Well, apparently your fine nephew must have forgotten that your contract reads you are to have three months' notice before you can be displaced. And as we hold the reins for that length of time, you'll continue to do the engaging and discharging. Those new hands will have to clear out, for not a dollar of pay will they get here, or a single meal, if I can help it."

Mr. Comstock's lower jaw fell. He stared helplessly first at the aggressive woman and then toward his nephew. Evidently she had "taken the wind

from his sails" completely by this sudden assertion, and he did not know what to say.

But Adrian was equal to the emergency. He never lost his temper in the least degree as he waited until he caught the angry eye of Mrs. Fred.

"What you say about the contract is very true, so far as it goes, Aunt Josie," he observed, steadily; "but you forget evidently that it also reads that in case I wish to change managers I am to give three months' notice, or else pay Uncle Fred that much salary in lieu of said notice. Here is the amount in this roll of bills, which, when he accepts, will constitute the change, so that he will no longer hold the position of manager of the Bar-S Ranch."

He held out the money toward the little man. As he did so the woman gave a loud and ominous cry.

"Refuse to take it, Fred; don't you dare touch his money!" she demanded, furiously. "If you decline to take it he'll have to let you stay the three months out, don't you see, you idiot?"

Perhaps that last part of her speech brought the man to a realization of the humiliating fact that there were numerous spectators to his being hen-pecked. At any rate Uncle Fred gritted his teeth, and stretching out his hand, took the money deliberately from Adrian. With a flash of his old independence he immediately held it up and said in a loud voice:

"Everybody take notice that I've accepted the pay for three months in advance from my nephew, and in so doing I sever all my connection with the Bar-S Ranch as manager."

With that he contemptuously threw the roll of money at the feet of his wife. She looked at first as though she could tear him to pieces. Then, unable to resist the lure of the ready cash she stooped down and picked the three months' salary up.

"Perhaps you think that this closes the house to Fred and me!" she snapped, turning on Adrian furiously; "but you have another guess coming, boy! You're pretty young to meddle with the business of grown men; and there may be snarls about our affairs that'll be harder to unravel than just tying up four drunken cattle rustlers, and bringing back the stock they'd run off. If you came here to make war on a woman, you're bound to get your fill before it's all over. And you'll find that I'm not without friends who'll see me get my rights. That's all I've got to say to you; but there'll be another chapter to this story, don't forget that!"

She flung these bitter words at Adrian as though each one had a poisonous sting with which she meant to inflict pain upon him. Undoubtedly Aunt Josie did not intend to welcome her husband's nephew in any hearty fashion to his ranch which he had not seen for some years, and which she had of late come to look upon as more or less her indi-

vidual property, to be looted at will by her rapacious relatives.

She started to walk away, her head held high in the air, and as Adrian thought with the bearing of an angry empress. Her high and lofty manner must have struck some of the cowboys as ludicrous. She had rubbed it into them on numerous occasions, and naturally they glorified in her apparent downfall. One of them gave a low mocking laugh. Instantly the woman whirled around, and her eyes seemed to fairly blaze as she surveyed the group.

"Who laughed then?" she demanded; but no one answered, though several shrank back appalled; and Donald saw the man in hiding behind the bunk house, Mr. Thomas, draw his head in much after the manner of a tortoise when danger approaches.

"Cowards, all of you!" she went on to say, in a harsh tone; "you can insult a woman behind her back, but not one of you is man enough to acknowledge a little thing like that. Never mind, it won't be long before I'll be in a position to hold the whip hand, and then we'll see who stays and who goes. As for you, Fred Comstock, just *wait*, that's all!"

This time when she walked toward the ranch house not a sound broke out. Uncle Fred turned a troubled face toward his nephew.

"I wouldn't dare be left alone with her again after this for a king's ransom, and that's the truth, Adrian," he said, slowly. "Perhaps, since I'm

discharged from my position here, I ought to clear out right away before night. It looks cowardly, but there's no other safety for me, I candidly admit."

"No, don't hurry about going, Uncle," remonstrated Adrian, taking him aside so he could speak without others hearing, for he knew that some of the punchers had not been looking on him with friendly eyes; and these must be the men who were hand in glove with Hatch Walker and his sister, the wife of Uncle Fred.

"But my usefulness here has all departed, and why should I linger?" urged the despondent ex-manager.

"You don't know what may happen yet, and if we have trouble with those Walkers you may get a chance to retrieve some of the blunders of the past year," the boy went on to say, laying a hand affectionately on his uncle's sleeve, for the other was shaking his head sadly in the negative as though he could not see a gleam of light in the overcast sky. "I didn't get a chance to tell you that we met up with Frank Bowker, the puncher you sent to town on an errand; and I entrusted him with a note to the new sheriff, demanding that he gather a reliable posse at once and ride out to the Bar-S Ranch, because a fight was on with the rustler gang of Walkers, and we meant to settle this thing once and for all. That blot has been on this county far

too long, and he must know it. So you see, Uncle Fred, after all this storm may clear the air; and when it passes by perhaps you may be glad to take up the reins here again as manager for me!"

The man looked at him with tears in his eyes, so greatly was he affected by this show of confidence in him. He seized hold of Adrian's hand, and squeezed it in an almost frenzied fashion, while he went on to say in a tone husky with emotion:

"What you say sounds too good to ever come true, son; because, you see, I'm her husband through thick and thin, because the law made me so; and where I am she has a right to be also. No, I must go away and try to start fresh somewhere else. But," he added, while the old fighting spirit flashed into his blue eyes once more; "if you think there's going to be war with the Walker tribe before this thing's threshed out, why, I might defer my going till it's all over, and the returns in. If so be I got a chance to settle my differences with that lawless brother of hers, Hatch Walker, I'd feel easier in my mind, anyhow, so I'll try and hang out yet awhile, Adrian, my boy!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS.

"I'M glad to hear you say that, Uncle Fred," Adrian told him, realizing what a struggle must be going on inside, when the other talked in this strain. "Things can't be any worse for you than they seem right now; and who knows what might turn up to bring about a change. Anyhow, I believe in sticking it out. If it gets to the worst, why, between you and me there might be a chance for you to run down to Arizona, and be the overseer at the Mackay place; because I happen to know that his foreman, Si Ketcham, is going to marry a girl who owns a ranch, and that he expects to throw up his job with Donald's dad pretty soon."

"Oh! that would be just the thing, if only *she* didn't know where I'd gone!" exclaimed the other, eagerly; "but let's forget my troubles for a while, Adrian, and talk of other things. You'll want to know all about matters here, how many cattle have been carried off the last year, and what's left. Come with me into this bunk house, where we can sit down, and have it over with."

As they turned the corner of the long, low building they came upon a crouching figure. It was Mr. Thomas, who started to limp away at their approach.

"Who's this tramp?" asked Uncle Fred, quickly.

"He's a poor fellow," explained Adrian, "whose horse died under him while he was on the way to see if he could get a job with you, taking care of the ranch books. All he asks is his board in payment for his services. I took him back of me on my pony, thinking we might keep him, for a while anyhow, till he felt better. He's sick now, and badly off, you see."

"I should say I was in a tough corner all around," mumbled the man; "and p'raps it'd be better for me to go as soon as I'm able. Don't bother about me; I c'n hang out around the bunk house here, and get a bite now and then, till there's a wagon going off, when mebbe you'll let me ride. I've changed my mind about wantin' to take up a job here; too much excitement to suit me. I'm all of a tremble right now with hearing what I did."

"Oh! all right, Mr. Thomas, please yourself," said Adrian, with a shrug of his shoulders; "you can stay around awhile, and the first chance that comes along make a shift of quarters. The boys'll see that you get something to eat; or else ask the Chink cook."

As he and the deposed manager entered the build-

ing, he went on to explain a little further, seeing that Uncle Fred looked curious.

"He's pretty much of a harmless fellow, I take it. All the way here he kept telling of things he had done until you'd think he was a hero if ever there was one; but I reckon it's all brag with him, and that he's as timid as they make them. But let's sit down here, and have a good chin, Uncle."

They were alone in the bunk house, as far as Adrian could see, so he did not hesitate to speak freely concerning his plans, especially with regard to having sent for the sheriff and his posse, with the idea of opposing any hostile move the lawless Walkers might undertake, upon finding how conditions had changed with the coming of the real owner of Bar-S Ranch.

"It may pass off without open trouble," Adrian concluded, "but if half I've been hearing about this Hatch Walker is true, I don't think he'll stand by and see his sway of power over the section knocked out, without making some sort of fight. He may not come into the open, but there are lots of ways of burning ranch buildings, or running off stock, that could be tried. One thing I'm determined on, and that is either I'm going to be boss of my own outfit, or else there won't be any outfit left on Bar-S Ranch!"

"Good! I like to hear that sort of talk. It's the stuff I used to put up before I was so unfor-

fortunate as to run across a woman who was bent on marrying me. There was where I made my one great mistake. The widow was too much for me, and almost before I knew it we were spliced. You can imagine how I felt later on when first I learned that Mrs. Smeed was really the sister of Hatch Walker. Oh! well, here I am talking about my personal affairs again, when I said I'd let them drop."

"First of all," said Adrian, "you must give me a list of the punchers who are employed on the range here, and put a cross in front of every name belonging to a man you have any reason to believe is connected with the Walkers."

"Oh! I can do that easy, and right now," replied the other quickly. "I know them all, for haven't they laughed at my orders of late, after they learned how I was badgered by a woman, me who had always been a *man* before. Shall I write them out now for you, son?"

"Yes, because I will want to weed out the goats from the sheep pretty soon, and at that time a mistake might cost us dear. Only the faithful shall be put on guard. The ones you black-ball will get their month's pay, and be made to walk the plank by night-time, if possible; because who knows what may happen once darkness comes along; and a traitor in the camp is worse than three open foes."

"Right you are there, Adrian; and it tickles me to find you so clever at sizing things up."

He busied himself with pencil and paper for several minutes; after which he handed over the list he had made out.

"You see," Mr. Comstock presently said, as Adrian looked over the list, "we've got ten punchers here just now, though time was when we needed nearly twice that number; but then the herds ain't what they used to be, what with two big hauls, and some hard luck last winter in a blizzard."

"And you seem to have put a cross in front of just five out of the ten names; so it looks as though you couldn't trust half your force," the boy remarked.

"Just so, Adrian," came the reply. "She let some of my best men go because they wouldn't take orders from her. In time p'raps the rest of the decent ones'd have been weeded out too; they were always in hot water with the missus, and threatening to throw up their jobs, only I begged them to stand by me, or I'd quit too. You can depend on the five through thick and thin."

"One of them is Frank Bowker, the man you sent to town, so that leaves just four on deck right now; with my three new hands that makes seven of the right sort; and then the three of us boys adds up ten, just enough to handle things if we have to."

"And count me in with you, because I'm not

too old to throw a rope or ride the wickedest cayuse in the bunch; fact is, there's only one thing on the face of this earth I seem to be afraid of. I won't mention names, son, because you know what that is without my saying it."

"Supposing now that those four rustlers made a bee line for home as soon as the one we had with us part of the way here could get back to his mates, and set them free, what do you expect would happen?" Adrian inquired.

"Well," said Mr. Comstock, "if Hatch Walker was home the chances are the first thing he'd do would be to knock those unlucky punchers sky-high. Depend on it the next time you come across any one of that bunch you'll notice black eyes in plenty."

"And then what else?" continued the boy.

"You see, Hatch, he's run things so long around here now, at his sweet will, that like as not he'll think of that bunch of cattle as belonging to him. And getting a lot of his boys together he'll even come swinging along this way to try to run 'em off the second time, and in broad daylight, too."

"Well, he certainly is a bold one for a fact, and it's about time he had his wings clipped!" declared the boy, surprised at the condition of affairs in the region that had, during the lifetime of his father, been a peaceful community, stirred up only once in a

while when some herder of sheep angered the cow-punchers, and a little shooting followed.

"I'm wondering if I could manage to get into my room through the window without Josie seeing me," Uncle Fred continued.

Then seeing the boy's look of astonishment he went on to explain.

"You see, I came running out so fast I hadn't time to think of picking up my belt, and putting it on; so my gun is in there. And the worst of it is, I can't enter my room without passing through the one *she* occupies. That's how she manages all the time. Just now I wouldn't like to let her get hold of me. I never yet struck a woman in all my life, and no matter what happens I'm getting too old now to begin on a new tack. So, there you see what a fix I'm in, son."

"Oh!" laughed Adrian, "you could borrow a gun from one of the boys who might happen to own an extra one. Don't have anything to do with Aunt Josie until we see how things turn out here. Perhaps there'll be a big change come along, and the situation will take on a new phase. But suppose the Walkers do make a daylight raid, what about the other herds that are out on the range?"

Mr. Comstock jumped to his feet excitedly.

"There's two big lots, and they'd get 'em as easy as falling off a log, that's dead sure!" he exclaimed; "and to think of me sitting here taking

things easy when I ought to be outside hustling every puncher off to drive the balance of our cattle into the corrals, where we could stand guard over them to-night, or till the sheriff comes, anyway."

"But there must be some system about what you do, Uncle Fred," interposed Adrian.

"Yes, sure there must, but what do you mean by that, son?"

"There are fourteen punchers all told, and five of them you can't depend on to do the right thing; is that so?" continued the boy.

"Yes, and now I see what you mean, Adrian; we must fix it so that the greater part of each bunch of drivers will be our stand-by men," the deposed manager said, hastily.

"Yes, if two gangs go out let three of the suspects accompany the one that has five of our fellows along, so that if they desert, or try any tricks, they'll be at least outnumbered. Billie needn't do any riding because I reckon he's nearly played out. That would leave two others to go with me and a couple of the Walker sympathizers; and depend on it I'll keep an eye on that pair good and hard. If they try any funny business they'll be sorry, that's all. So fix things that way, Uncle Fred; and chances are we'll get all the cattle safely home before the Walkers come along."

"You're a great hand to plan things, son; and I'll do that same; only I hope I can get the loan of

a spare gun, if I'm to be left at home when the rest of you go off. I'd be afraid of my life otherwise, I give you my solemn word for it."

They left the bunk house after that. As they did so a face showed up at one of the windows further on, proving that some one had taken the trouble to listen, in hopes of hearing what plans they made; and it was the face of one of the suspects, in the bargain.

CHAPTER XIX.

BILLIE HAS SUSPICIONS.

ONCE outside again they found that the punchers still hung around as though understanding that their services would soon be needed in some way.

With something like his old decisive way of handling men, before his spirit had been almost broken through constant quarrels with his wife, Mr. Comstock picked out such men as he thought ought to be sent out in the two parties, with orders to drive all the stock into the corrals with all haste possible.

One of these was placed in charge of Donald. Besides himself it consisted of three of the suspects and four reliable punchers, eight in all; and they were to go after the larger herd known to be feeding on the hillsides some miles off.

Adrian himself had lanky George Hess, one of his new men, a puncher known as Monkey Jones on account of his agility on the back of a pony, but who was one of Mr. Comstock's select list, and two of the suspects. They expected to round up a smaller bunch of long-horns, and get them home safely.

Billie watched all these proceedings as though wondering where he came in.

"Don't I ride along with you, Adrian?" he asked, plaintively, when there was no mention of his name given, and the two parties prepared to sally forth.

"No, not this time, Billie," replied the other, softly, for some of the men were close by, looking to their saddle-girths, and in other ways making sure things were all right before galloping forth; "Uncle Fred has to stay at home, and you had better keep him company. You see how things stand. We'll have a warm ride of it; and you never did like driving cattle, you know. Besides, if you are sighing for excitement who knows what may happen here while the rest of us are gone; and you'd better make it a point not to get separated from your rifle, for even one minute!"

"Billie's eyes grew round with comprehension. He could not get the angry face of Mrs. Fred out of his mind; and he felt that Adrian must refer to her when he spoke of trouble springing up.

"Say, I reckon now that's right," he replied.

"You never know what a woman's agoin' to do, any more'n you can tell which way she's meaning to throw a ball by the way she aims. And poor old Uncle Fred looks like he needed a guardian some, too. So I'll stick it out here at home; but get back as soon as you can, Adrian. Mebbe a bunch of them Walkers might run in on us here, and with only two men to hold 'em off, why, we'd need assistance, you see"

Satisfied that Billie was contented to carry out the part of the plan assigned to him Adrian hurried over to where he had left his horse. One of the cowboys belonging to the ranch was standing close by, and when Adrian saw that he happened to be one of the untrustworthy ones who had been picked out to accompany him on the drive, he wondered whether the fellow might not have planned to do something to injure his precious mount.

At least Ten Spot was holding his ears far back, and acting in a vicious manner, as though determined not to allow the stranger to lay hands on him.

When Adrian gave the fellow a keen look he mumbled something about meaning to "fetch the boss' horse to him, only the animal wouldn't let him come near;" and then shuffled away to where his own pony was standing.

"I'll look out for you, my hearty," thought the boy, for if ever there had been such a thing as

treachery on any face, he had seen it there in those shifting eyes and hangdog attitude.

Presently the two parties started off. Of course they would not be genuine cow-punchers if they had not shown more or less extravagance in their way of riding, every fellow seeming to have some favorite way of jumping into his saddle, and then dashing away at headlong speed, waving his hat or his hand, and perhaps giving vent to shrill yells.

Away they coursed over the prairie, one to the north, and the other heading further east. Of course both Adrian and Donald depended entirely on the local punchers to find the cattle; and were wide-awake and not to be deceived by anything that might be said by one of those under the ban, who would possibly want to lead them astray, so that precious time must be lost.

Billie stood and watched them depart with a feeling of despondency. He disliked seeing his two chums leave him, even if it was for only a short time. But then he remembered what Adrian had said about his being "on guard," and that something was likely to happen there while the others were gone, that would call for valor on his part.

He meant to stand by Uncle Fred, though secretly Billie hoped deep down in his heart that this would not bring him into personal contact with that black-eyed woman who could cast a look on a fellow as though she might be tempted to eat him.

The riders galloped steadily on until they looked like specks in the distance. Of course their return would be considerably slower, because they would then be driving obstinate cattle; and no matter how dextrous the punchers might be, delays were sure to occur.

"I hope they don't run upon any snag," Billie was muttering to himself, as he noticed that the smaller party had already vanished from his view; "because, after all that's been said and done, I think Adrian deserves to save what long-horns he's got left here on his ranch. Now, who was that peeking at me around the corner of that bunk house? Somebody drew back like a flash, and acted suspicious, seems like. Reckon it's up to me to investigate the same. P'raps now this might turn out to be the trouble that Adrian hinted would as like as not crop up here, and which he said I would have to handle. Here goes, then!"

Saying this Billie cautiously handled his repeating rifle, so that it lay in the crotch of his left arm; while he touched the trigger with the forefinger of his right hand; and having so arranged matters he took several bold steps toward the spot where he had seen that head vanish.

His heart seemed to be in his mouth as he turned the corner of the building, for he did not know what sort of a reception might greet him.

No sooner had he done this than he gave a re-

lieved gasp. There was indeed a cringing figure there, but he immediately recognized the fellow as Mr. Thomas, the pilgrim whom they had succored on the trail to Bar-S Ranch, and who hoped to get some sort of position there, at least with a chance of three square meals a day as payment for his clerical services.

"Oh! it's only you, is it?" grunted Billie, lowering the rifle that was trembling in his nervous grip.

"Yes, that's all," whined the other. "Hope I didn't alarm you any when I poked my head out to see if the coast was clear."

"What, alarm *me*?" answered the fat boy, in a voice of lofty scorn; "well, let me tell you it'd take a whole lot more'n that to scare me. You saw how quick I stepped around here to find out what it meant, didn't you? That don't look like I could be so easy frightened, does it? Well, I should say not. But what're you hanging out here for, when you might as well go to the house? Didn't Adrian tell you to stay for a time anyhow; and he's the boss here, you must know."

"But I don't want to go to the house at all," remonstrated the man, as he heaved a long sigh, and looked nervously around. "Fact is, I've changed my mind about acceptin' any work here. I might stay around till to-morrow, sleeping out in the bunk house with the boys; and then if there's a wagon going to town I'll go along. I've remembered a very

important engagement that I ought to keep, you see. That's why I couldn't think of staying here."

"Huh! seems to me it's mighty funny you didn't think of that same before you ever started out on the trail," Billie grunted, eying the other half suspiciously; while to himself he was saying: "Wonder now what does ail the fellow? Ever since he set eyes on Mr. Comstock he acts different from what he did. Say, wonder if he could have done the gent an injury, and recognized him when he came here? I reckon I had ought to keep an eye on Mister Thomas; who knows what he might be up to? But I won't let him know he's under suspicion. I'll just pretend to let it pass along, and watch him out of the corner of my left optic."

Following out this policy Billie engaged the other in conversation. If he expected that the said Mr. Thomas would let fall any sort of hint that would tell him why he had really changed his mind so suddenly, Billie must have been disappointed, for the other made no mention of his own affairs, seeming to be more interested in the possibility of trouble, should the dreaded Walkers come down upon Bar-S Ranch, meaning to take by open force what they had failed to secure through the stampede.

"If they do tackle your crowd there's apt to be a fight on, I take it," he remarked, "and more'n likely now somebody might get hurt. Guess it was the worst thing I ever set out to do when that notion of

getting a job at the Bar-S popped into my silly head. Jumpin' right out of the frying-pan into the fire, so to speak. But how'd I ever dream I'd run acrost—but I was going to say that when it comes time to feed p'raps you'll remember I'm out here in the bunk house, and fetch me just a few bites. I'm half sick, and my leg hurts like anything, which is why I hadn't ought to go in, to eat with the rest. But I just know I'll feed worse if I ain't had a few bites. You won't forget, will you, Mister Billie?"

Of course the fat boy promised to remember; but he thought it more than supicious that Thomas made such a silly excuse for keeping away from the rest. He hugged the idea to his heart that the man had another reason, and a good one too, for avoiding Uncle Fred; because, you see Billie did not know that they had already met, and been "introduced" by Adrian, with no unpleasant discovery and explosion as a result.

Being very frank himself it was just like Billie to say something along these lines to the other, which he did in this way:

"Strikes me, Mr. Thomas, that you don't hanker much about striking up an acquaintance with Adrian's Uncle Fred. I only hope now that you haven't done anything to injure him in the past.

At that the man looked carefully about him, and then coming up to Billie laid a hand confidentially on his arm, as he went on to say softly:

“I understand what you’re thinking about, sir, and I hasten to assure you that your suspicions are all unfounded. I never injured Mr. Comstock, and I sure didn’t rob him of anything in all my life. Fact is, the boot is on the other leg, if you come right down to hard facts. But I’m not complaining, not one whit. He’s as welcome as the the daylight. Let’s talk of other things, my young friend. And please turn that repeating gun the other way. It makes me nervous to see it pointing right at me. There, that’s better; but I think I’d better go in and lie down, I’m feeling that bad.”

CHAPTER XX.

ALMOST CAUGHT.

“Now, I wonder what does ail that queer gent?” mused Billie, after the other had left him, to enter the bunk house, with the avowed intention of lying down. “He limps like all get-out, sure as anything, and I reckon he does look like he’s sick, or scared half to death about something or other. Whatever could it be that’s upset him so since he arrived here? Must be the chance of a scrap coming off; because even if he does boast so hard I’m believing Mr. Thomas is pretty much of a chicken-hearted fellow.

My! how he does roll them white eyes of his around whenever he hears the least sound."

He poked his head in through the open doorway, and saw that the pilgrim of the trail had indeed rolled into one of the bunks that did not seem to belong to any of the punchers; for there were twice as many sleeping places as hands on the place in these days of hard luck for Bar-S Ranch.

"Well, mebbe he *is* sick after all," continued the tender-hearted Billie; "and if I get half a chance to sneak any grub, I'll remember to fetch it to him; because it's *awful* to have to go hungry. Guess I know. And right now I wish I could manage to pick up a few bites, just to keep away that gnawing feeling inside. But me go in that ranch house, and face that lady—well, not if Broncho Billie knows what's good for him, and he generally does. There's some things even worse than being hungry; and getting her hands in my hair'd be one of the same. No siree bob, excuse me. Let her practice on her lawful husband as much as she likes; I ain't in that pulling game."

He walked up and down outside as if he were a sentry on guard. And indeed, Billie rather felt as though such were his duties just then, for he could not get entirely over his suspicions with regard to that mysterious Mr. Thomas, and his way of dodging, as though he feared being seen by some one who would recognize him.

“Goodness knows what he may have done!” Billie went on to tell himself after a little more time had elapsed, and his thoughts persisted in returning to the subject of the man in the bunk house. “I wonder, now, if there’s anything inside that he could get away with? But then, cow-punchers never leave their savings around loose; fact is, few of ’em ever have a dollar three days after getting paid. Oh! well, I’ll let him alone for a while, and take a look around the corrals and the barns.”

After that he walked about “sizing up things” as he called it. As the sun was bright, though the afternoon had half gone, Billie suddenly remembered that he had a kodak in his pack; so opening this he secured the little snapshot camera, meaning to take his first view of the ranch buildings.

After securing one picture Billie became aware of the fact that Mr. Comstock was beckoning wildly to catch his attention.

“Now, what does he want, I wonder?” the fat boy asked himself; “there he goes at his wireless again, and seems like he was making motions for me to come over back of the house to where he is. Looks like he was ahiding behind that woodpile, too. What ails all the people here, to want to dodge around like they do? But then, there might be some excuse for Uncle Fred to keep mum; because if ever *she* gets them hands on him after this, there’s going to be some warm times, believe me. Shall I go over

and join him, or make out I don't understand, because I want to take another view of the house?"

Then Billie remembered his promise to Adrian.

"I did say I'd watch out for Uncle Fred, sure enough; and he acts like he needed a nurse, or something like that, right now. Guess I'll wander around that way; I can make out to be looking for another view of the place, if anybody is ataking the trouble to watch me."

This he did, and presently joined the late manager of the ranch. Mr. Comstock was still crouching behind that pile of wood. Every now and then he thrust out his head and seemed disposed to start toward the house; but something always caused him to weaken, for he would draw back, shaking his head as if to say: "I can't seem to do it, and that's flat!"

"What's the matter, sir?" asked Billie, when he had come up.

"Would you mind doing me a little favor, Billie?" asked the other, with a smile that was intended to be very winning.

"Of course I would, if it wasn't beyond me," replied the fat boy; "Adrian told me to help you if you needed anything done."

"Why, you see, here's the way things stand," the late manager commenced to say. "When I heard all the racket, and somebody shouted that the stolen herd was coming back, I was that excited I ran out of the house without taking the trouble to pick up

my belt, that carries my gun. It lies in there where you see that open window close to the ground. All you need do is to crawl through, reach it out to me, and then skip again. Get that straight, do you, Billie?"

"Y-yes, sir," Billie said, slowly enough, for somehow he did not particularly fancy the adventure, since there was a pretty good chance that he would run across the good woman of the house while entering like a burglar; and he shivered when he had a mental picture of how she would pounce upon him.

"I'd go myself, you see, Billie, only that I'm afraid of that female dragon that the law calls Mrs. Comstock. What she'd do to me if she caught me in there would be a caution. And I want that gun the worst kind, because, if there's going to be any sort of rumpus I'll need it. Will you go, Billie?"

"I s'pose I'll have to, sir; but I only hope that she don't grab me; because I just know from her looks, not to mention her reputation as a scrapper, that I'll be the worst clawed fellow in seven counties before she lets go. You must promise to stay by the window, and give me fair warning if she comes."

This did not seem to make the other very happy; but evidently he realized that he could not very well expect Billy to take all the risk.

"Agreed, Billie," he said, quickly. "Lead off, now; it's that window closest to the corner, you understand. I'll look in after you climb over, and take

the belt from you. If I give tongue, you jump for all you're worth out of the said window, because that'll mean I've sighted her acoming."

"All right; who's afraid?" said Billie valiantly; he even thought of handing over his rifle to the other, with directions to cover his venturesome trip through that window; but on second thoughts decided, that it would not be the right thing to use such a weapon on one of the other sex, no matter what an Amazon she might be.

Mr. Comstock followed close behind as the boy advanced toward the open window; but it could be easily seen that he was ready to beat a rapid retreat should the enemy suddenly put in an appearance anywhere around.

"She ain't there!" whispered Billie, after he had taken a cautious look inside the room which the former manager of the ranch had been wont to call his "office," and which, as he had said, could only be entered ordinarily through another apartment.

But if Billie cherished any faint hope that the other, on learning that the coast was clear, would immediately offer to undertake the affair for himself, he found himself woefully mistaken.

"Do you need any help to climb over the window sill?" whispered Mr. Comstock, who did not forget that the boy was unusually heavy, and consequently far from being as agile as either of his two chums.

Billie shook his head, but he confessed to a grievous disappointment all the same. He was evidently in for it, no matter what might follow. On looking down at his feet he discovered a stone that he could mount, and after he had done this it was likely to be a much easier job clambering in through the low window than at first appearance he had expected.

"Who's afraid?" he again muttered softly to himself; for that was one of his pet ways for bolstering up his courage when he began to feel his knees wobble under him, and knew that his heart was beating twice as fast as normal.

Accordingly he gave a heave, and in this way managed to get his right knee elevated upon the window ledge. After that it was easy enough; and presently Billie lowered himself into the room.

He felt very queer while doing this, just for all the world as though he might be a real burglar intending to steal valuables, and in momentary terror lest the angry man of the house dash in upon him.

All seemed quiet enough, though he could hear some one moving around in the adjoining room, and took for granted that this must be Mrs. Comstock. Billie sincerely hoped that whatever she was doing, whether packing up her clothes in expectation of an early flitting, or anything else, she would keep right along at it, and not bother taking a look through that open doorway.

He glanced cautiously around him, trying to get his bearings, and discover just where the coveted article lay.

"To your right—on the desk!" whispered the man outside.

Billie turned around to move in that direction. As he did so he managed to dislodge a small picture that had been pinned to the wall. It fell with a slight noise, and Billie's heart seemed to stand still with sudden fear.

When nothing happened Billie took his courage in both hands, and started to move over to where the big rolltop desk stood, intending to pick up the belt and hasten to hand it to Mr. Comstock, after which he would get outside where he could breathe again naturally, and without such a dread specter hanging over his head.

Yes, there was the belt, just as the former manager had said, lying snugly on the desk; and the revolver seemed to be as usual in the leather holster which was heavily studded with buttons or round-headed colored nails, cowboy fashion.

Billie went forward another pace, and reaching out his hand picked the whole affair up. How glad he was now that he had leaned his rifle against the outside wall of the house before venturing in through the window.

He turned to retrace his steps. Just then he thought he heard a suspicious little sound like a

gasp behind him; and it seemed as though a cold hand gripped his heart.

If he had any doubts concerning what it signified they were dissipated even before he could think to twist his head around; for Uncle Fred suddenly called out in a shrill voice that was full of anxiety and excitement:

“Run for it, Billie; she’s coming after you!”

Billie did not wait upon the order of his going. He seemed to be placed in connection with a galvanic battery, to judge by the way he sprang forward, thrust the belt into the outstretched hand of Mr. Comstock, and then took a header right through the open window.

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. THOMAS IS AMUSED.

WITH all his clumsiness Billie had always seemed to be a lucky fellow. In times gone by his chums had often informed him that he must bear a charmed life; because when so stubbornly trying to break in that wild broncho Jupiter, the fat boy had taken many a header that threatened to do him serious injury; but had always “come up smiling” after each experience, and ready to try it again.

And apparently his good fortune still held good,

for when he took that flying leap through the open window of the ranch house, he did not have the remotest idea where he would land, and yet he managed to strike in a soft place.

It had been a very narrow escape, though; for hardly had the fat boy passed through the opening than it was occupied by the figure of Mrs. Comstock, with both her hands eagerly outstretched, showing that she had anticipated seizing hold of the intruder.

When he landed Billie purposely rolled over several times. He seemed to have a dreadful fear lest the Amazon follow him through the window; just as a pursuing boy might have done.

Having turned over completely several times he managed to sit up so as to take notice of the situation, and get his bearings.

The first thing he saw was the head of Mr. Thomas thrust around the end of the nearby bunk house; and it was strange that Billie just happened to notice how cautiously the pilgrim of the trail was peeping, as though he would not be seen for worlds; there was a look of intense interest on his thin face, too, as if he felt a personal interest in the wild flight of the lad.

Next Billie saw Uncle Fred. He was trying to buckle the recovered belt around his waist, and making a poor job of it, because his fingers were trembling with the excitement; and besides, he felt it nec-

essary to keep one eye fastened on that window, in which the form of his muscular better-half could be seen outlined.

Billie also noted with solid satisfaction that the woman did not seem to be making any move in his direction. She must have recognized the fact that her expected prey had eluded her grasp, and was satisfied to let things go at that.

But she was waving her fist in his direction, Billie noted; and his heart beat with thanksgiving that he had been so fortunate as to avoid feeling the weight of that hand.

"What do you mean acrawling in through the back windows of this house, you fat cub?" she called out at him.

Perhaps Billie had long ago become so accustomed to having all manner of fun poked at him by his boy friends, on account of his ponderous size that he had ceased to get angry at any sort of nickname.

Still, that was "a new one on him," he afterwards declared, and it rather rankled to be called a "fat cub."

Billie was always polite, especially with the other sex; and so he managed to scramble to his feet, rather awkwardly to be sure, for he had skinned his left knee in landing after that wild plunge; and trying to make a sort of half-way sort of bow, he said:

"I beg your pardon ma'm, but I was acting under orders from the boss. He wanted his gun so's to be ready to fight the rustlers if they came along, and asked me to get the same for him; so I clumb in through the window, because he said that was the shortest way around. And when you came so sudden-like on me, why, I just got rattled some, I s'pose, and took a jump through the window. But no damage was done 'cept that I knocked a piece of skin off my left knee 'bout as big as my hand, feels like. Sorry to have bothered you, ma'm, but I tried not to make any noise, sure I did."

"Yes, you crept in just like a thief, and I reckon that's what line you follow when you're to home," the angry woman flung at him, accompanying each word with a furious shake of her hand, which seemed disappointed not to have been able to bury itself among Billie's hair.

"It was all my fault, Josie," remarked Mr. Comstock just then, possibly ashamed to let the boy bear the brunt of her displeasure; "I wanted my belt very much; and you seemed to be having one of your headaches, so I thought I wouldn't pass in through your room and disturb you. I asked him to just crawl through the window and reach my belt, which he succeeded in doing. It's all right, Josie!"

"Oh! you think so, do you, Mr. Fred Comstock?" she cried shrilly, and with her blazing eyes turned toward her husband. "Shows what sort of a cow-

ard you are, sir, to employ a silly fool of a boy to pull your chestnuts out of the fire for you!"

"But sometimes the fire burns a fellow's fingers, you know, Josie; and I've learned long ago not to worry you when—you're not feeling well," the deposed manager of Bar-S Ranch went on to say, perhaps a little more boldly than he might have dared had the distance separating him from the lady been less.

As if afraid that he had been too rash in saying so much Uncle Fred turned, and hurried away, calling out as he started:

"Better come along, Billie; plenty to look after for all of us who are left behind. You did your work well, and I want to tell you I'm glad you didn't get—that is, your injuries are not worse than a skinned knee. There are more dreadful things that that can happen, my boy, take it from me."

This last he uttered in a low tone, and even at that something caused him to cast a glance of apprehension over his shoulder when speaking; but Mrs. Fred had vanished from the window.

As they turned the corner of the bunk-house they discovered the form of Thomas writhing on the ground.

"Here, what's ailing you, my friend?" demanded the late manager; "if you've been suddenly taken sick I'm sorry that my medicine case is in my desk; and just at present it's a physical impossibility for

either Billie or myself to step in there to get it. Where do you feel bad?"

At that the pilgrim of the trail looked up, and they saw that he was grinning.

"'Tain't that I'm taken with the gripe, sir; not in the least," he explained. "I'm only tickled to death at the narrow escape our young friend had. I thought he was a goner when I heard you shout out that warning, and saw him still inside there; but he made a great plunge. My! but the lady was provoked because he slipped out like a greased pig. It was a lucky escape for Broncho Billie, now, wasn't it, sir?"

He chuckled as he said this, and even winked at Uncle Fred in a queer way. The late manager of the ranch turned somewhat red in the face, and eyed the other a little suspiciously. Then he shook his head.

"Perhaps you know how peculiar some women are when they can't have everything they want, my friend," he remarked; "and how they're apt to carry on. It may be now that you've had experience in the years that are past and gone? Well, in that case you'll understand me when I remark that the least said the soonest mended. Forget what you chanced to see, and things will come easier for you here. Ladies have their peculiarities, and my wife never did like me tracking up her floors. That may be why I had Billie here make use of the window; be-

cause I've often used it myself rather than go all the way around."

Mr. Thomas winked an eye again, and nodded his head in a knowing way, as if to admit that he might have passed through similar experiences at some time in his past life.

Billie could not help thinking that the wanderer seemed to have been hugging himself while he rolled there on the ground, just as though he felt a personal satisfaction in the escape of the boy who had been one of those befriending him on the trail.

If this were really the cause of his hilarity it showed that Mr. Thomas was not without at least some degree of gratitude because of the favors they had bestowed on him.

As the incident seemed closed now, and there were plenty of other things looming up in the near future that demanded attention, Billie cast it out of his mind. He only allowed it to crop up each time his wounded knee gave him a little twinge, as he limped around after Mr. Comstock.

The stockman was soon very busy. He seemed to act like a different man, now that he could feel the presence of his faithful gun at his side whenever he allowed his hand to drop that way.

Billie followed him to the corrals, which he inspected carefully, as though meaning to discover any weakness that might interfere with his plans. Every few minutes the ranchman would shade his

eyes with his hand and look earnestly around in several directions. Billie understood that he was hoping to discover the first signs of the coming herds, which might be only in the shape of a cloud of dust along the horizon.

It was an anxious time, for a great deal depended on getting the stock in where the faithful drovers could guard it, until such time as the danger of a bold raid was past. Mr. Comstock had had so much trouble with the Walker crowd in the past that he would not put anything beyond them nowadays. Men become flushed with success, and even lose their accustomed shrewdness; and while it would seem to be a reckless thing for these rustlers to work in the open, still, acting under the belief that they had a friend at court in the shape of Comstock's wife, who would restrain him from taking any radical measures looking to resistance; and also knowing that half the force of Bar-S Ranch was virtually ready to side with the raiders, there could be no telling what would happen.

Billie, too, began to cast frequent looks along the distant horizon, in the hope of discovering the first signs that would indicate the coming of his chums, along with the cattle, and the other cow-punchers.

It was almost an hour after his little adventure along the flying machine order that Billie suddenly discovered what he sought.

"They're coming, Mr. Comstock!" he called,

limping toward the ranchman, who was busily engaged doing some mending at a weak place in the corral, which was made partly of ropes, and the balance of heavy poles brought from the river bottom miles and miles away; "I can see dust in two places; yes, and when the wind picked up just now I believe I heard the bellowing of cows."

So the ranchman clapped his glasses to his eyes, and immediately corroborated what the boy had so confidently declared.

"That's right, Billie!" he remarked, in some excitement; "and as sure as you live I can see that the boys are shoving them along quite lively. I hope now they haven't sighted the Walker clan coming with a rush; because, until we get those herds in the corrals with the rest here I'll never feel satisfied," and he fingered his gun, as though half tempted to jump on a horse, and gallop out to meet the drivers.

CHAPTER XXII.

SAFE IN THE CORRAL.

"WELL, I feel some easier now that they're getting in closer, and no signs of a pack of rough riders anywhere in sight beyond!" announced the rancher, after a little while had elapsed, which

counted anxious minutes for both himself and Billie.

Even Mr. Thomas had deigned to limp out, and offer to assist in any sort of work he might be able to do; but the stockman, after taking one look at his shrinking figure, told him he need not bother, since everything had been done looking to the safety of the corrals.

And so the pilgrim of the trail hung around; but as before, he impressed Billie as a very timid sort of a fellow, and ready to run or dodge at the first sign of any trouble.

Now the first herd was well in, and the punchers could be seen waving their hats as they darted this way and that on their active ponies, cutting off the dash of an obstreperous cow that took a sudden notion she did not want to head for the corrals, when the grass was so sweet away out on the hills, and under the trees growing along the watercourse.

"I'm glad to see that all the boys are working with a vim," Billie heard the late manager of the ranch say to himself, as he took note of the way the punchers carried on their business, every one seeming to be actively employed; and the boy could easily understand what he meant by those significant words.

In each party, it will be remembered that there were several of the men who secretly sided with the sister of Hatch Walker, the rustler, Uncle Fred's wife; and apparently the stockman had been uneasy

lest these fellows do everything in their power to create discord in the ranks, and delay the drive until their friends the rustlers came along.

It seemed however, that from some cause or other they could not have deemed it good policy to attempt this tricky play. Perhaps they saw from the way things were working that they were outnumbered in both bands; and the belief that this must have been done for a reason caused them to go slow about provoking trouble. Doubtless Fred Comstock may have given orders to the faithful few to keep their eyes on the alert and at the first sign of treachery to use their guns freely. That was the sort of reputation he used to have before the widow came into his life, and changed its current; and there were signs that Mr. Comstock might be getting near the point where he would assert his manhood once again, and break away from "petticoat rule."

The two herds arriving at nearly the same time there was a scene of tremendous excitement around the ranch buildings, with cowboys dashing this way and that, whooping at the top of their voices, and shouting out orders to one another.

Billie wanted to be with them, but that injured knee gave him a nasty wrench now and then; so he concluded to forego that pleasure. He could see that both of his chums were doing as fine work as any one belonging to the Bar-S Ranch; and more than once a fellow whom Billie suspected might be

under the ban would follow the flying form of Adrian with his eyes, as though trying to figure out what difference the coming of the real owner of the ranch might make in the final outcome.

By degrees the cattle were being separated as Mr. Comstock wished, and driven into the separate corrals. During this period of intense excitement those who were not engaged in the work watched operations with more or less interest. Even Charley Moo, the Chinese cook, could be seen leaning on the rail of a corral taking it all in; and there in the doorway of the ranch house stood Mrs. Comstock, apparently laughing scornfully to herself at all this confusion, just because a few of her relatives might be expected to make an evening call on her.

The day was not far from done when the last of the cattle had been chased through the jaws of the big corral, and the bars placed in position that made them prisoners, until such time as the stockman deemed it wise to let them out again. Meanwhile they would have to be fed from the store of hay that was kept on hand in big stacks, over in one of the fields away from the buildings, and intended for just such emergencies as this, or a bitter spell during a wintry blizzard, when forage could not be found by the herds in the sheltered places.

Once more Mr. Comstock was making use of his glasses to look anxiously toward a certain quarter. But now he was not anticipating the coming of the

rustlers, who, upon finding that the stock had slipped through their hands, and were safe in the corrals, were likely to remain aloof until late in the night, when they might with impunity approach close to the ranch, and try some of their sly games looking to effecting a breach in the stockade, and the release of the herds.

"Will they come from that direction, Uncle Fred?" asked Adrian, halting beside the other, as he mopped his steaming face with his red bandana handkerchief, which of course he carried, cowboy fashion, knotted about his neck, with the loose folds hanging in front, so that while riding swiftly along they could be utilized to wipe his eyes free from dust, without releasing his bridle hand.

"Well, you see, son," replied the other, as he lowered the glasses, and showed by his disappointed look that he had failed to glimpse some object he had been hoping to discover; "I'm not bothering about the rustler crowd just now. Since they didn't get along in time to stop the drive, and run off the cattle, chances are they'll hold off till midnight, or along about there. But I did hope to pick up a little dust over yonder. That's about where the sheriff and his posse'd be apt to show up, when they do come along."

"No signs of them yet, then, Uncle?"

"I'm sorry to say not, Adrian; but then, as the officer is a new hand he might find it a little difficult

to gather a posse. You see, these Walkers have a lot of friends scattered around, and that's going to make it hard to knock 'em out; but the new sheriff was elected for just that purpose, I was told, and they say he's a nervy man. Reckon he'll need all the grit he's got to tide him over; but at last the stockmen around this county have made up their minds this wholesale robbery has got to stop, no matter what sort of war comes along. And I'm going to join hands with them, in spite of what the rest of the house says."

He made this assertion boldly; but habit caused him to give a quick glance over his shoulder when speaking, just as though he half feared to discover Mrs. Comstock standing there, with upraised hand, and a bitter smile on her strong features.

But from the sigh of relief that broke involuntarily from the lips of Uncle Fred it was apparent that the coast was clear. Really, Adrian believed that if things kept going on in this way much longer, his relative would presently turn out to be as timid as some other men he had known, for instance that pilgrim of the trail, who gave his name as Mr. Thomas, and who acted as though he might be dodging a threatening hand most of the time.

Having completed their work the punchers were grouped together, exchanging many remarks after the manner of their kind; while the sweating ponies

stood around, each with his bridle rein trailing on the ground.

As yet the loyal workers did not know the full extent of the opposition; they seemed to sense something unusual in the air, and as they already knew the sentiments of the men who were in touch with Mrs. Comstock and her relatives, perhaps they could give a good guess that mighty interesting developments were bound to come about in the near future, and that a change in the way things were run up in that section of country was imminent.

This was shown to Donald by the way the four loyal punchers kept in a bunch, and rubbed elbows with the three new hands, whom the young owner of the ranch had employed to help out.

The night was not far away, and from indications it promised to be one calculated to be marked with a red star in the history of the Bar-S Ranch.

Adrian wondered how his father would have handled such a situation. The thought caused him to grit his teeth, and determine that come what might he would never knuckle down to those greedy Walkers; if forced to the wall he would give up trying to run the ranch, and leave a barren desert behind him when he retired; but not one dollar of tribute would he ever knowingly pay in order to purchase immunity.

Presently he saw Donald beckoning to him, and

went over to where the other chum was standing, leaning on the bars of the nearest corral.

Donald seemed to be amused over something, and of course Adrian was immediately curious to know what it meant.

"Tell me, so I can laugh with you, Donald," he remarked; "things look so serious all about us that it'd do me a heap of good just to have one little chuckle, if only I knew of anything funny. What's been happening around here?"

"Why, it's this way," replied the other, looking to right and left first, as though he did not want any one to overhear what he meant to say, for Donald never hurt anybody's feelings if he could avoid it; "your Uncle Fred came along here, and chancing to see Charley Moo, he made all sorts of gestures until he caught his eye, and then beckoned him over."

"Sure," Adrian went on to say, "to give him orders for supper, I reckon; because there's a raft of hungry punchers to feed to-night; and they tell me that Aunt Josie never bothers her head about what the boys get to eat, because her supper is cooked privately, and as a rule she eats it alone, uncle preferring to mess with his hands."

"Well, I guess this night Uncle Fred's a little mite afraid your aunt might take a notion to eat with the boys, like lots of women folks do on ranches down our way, so as to civilize the savages, they say.

Anyhow, I heard him give the Chink his orders all right, and after he was through he called Charley Moo back; and what d'ye think he told him?"

"How do you expect me to guess?" demanded Adrian.

"Well," continued the amused boy, "he explained that he wanted the cook to fetch some supper for him out to the corral, when all the rest were busy working their jaws—said that he felt that some one should be on guard *all* the time, and knowing how hungry the hard-working punchers were, he didn't have the heart to keep any one of them away from his feed. What do you think of that; a poor excuse is better than none at all, ain't it, Ad?"

"So they say," chuckled the other, who of course knew full well just why Uncle Fred did not care to enter the long room where the men took their meals, lest he see the figure of his wife at the head of the table, and be made to appear small in the eyes of the punchers.

"There, look at Mr. Comstock now!" exclaimed Donald, suddenly; "he seems excited, and keeps looking through his glasses as though he had sighted something or other. I wonder whether it turns out to be the sheriff's posse, or the rustlers?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD.

"I CAN see dust over there," Adrian hastened to remark, after he had taken a good look; "and it doesn't seem to be in the quarter where Uncle Fred told me he expected to see the sheriff's posse show up, sooner or later."

"Then that means it must be the rustlers coming!" ejaculated Billie, who had arrived in time to catch this last remark on the part of the other chum.

He handled his rifle nervously as he stared toward the point on the horizon, already growing dim as the day faded.

"Well, don't worry, Billie," Donald told him, "because they ain't going to come down on us in the daytime. P'raps, after all, it's only a few wanting to take a survey, so as to report what's been done."

"They'll see all the cattle penned up in the corrals, then, won't they?" asked the fat boy, anxiously.

"Easy enough," replied Donald; "but much good that'll do them. If they want to, let 'em go back and tell Hatch Walker what we've been doing."

"I really believe you wouldn't mind much if they

just did take a notion to drop in on us to-night, and make a try to break away with all the long-horns?" Billie observed, as he saw the look on Donald's dark sun-burned face.

"Oh! I'm not hankering after trouble," replied the other lad, carelessly; "but if they want to hang around here trying to rob Adrian of his property, why, there's going to be something doing, that's right. Times have changed some since the real owner came to Bar-S Ranch. Uncle Fred may have been forced to knuckle down to his wife when some of her folks dropped in to pay a friendly visit, and a bunch of valuable steers followed them off; but we ain't meaning to do the same. And if anybody thinks so they're got another guess coming, that's all."

"Would you really and truly shoot, if they did try that same," asked Billie.

Donald gave a little harsh laugh; he shut his jaws firmly together, and nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Wait and see, Billie," was what he said; "and I'm just as dead sure too, that you'd puncture a rustler in the leg or the shoulder if you got the chance, as that I can eat my share of the grub when the call comes to get busy."

"Whew! this sounds like real war, I think!" Billie ventured.

"It *is* war, and war to the knife, until the last

rustler is chased out of this part of the country," Adrian told him, sternly.

Billie looked out toward the spot where that little cloud of dust was seen.

"They've stopped now," he observed; "and since the dust has cleared away you can see quite a bunch of riders sitting there in their saddles. Seems like they might be talking it over, and laying plans."

"It promises to be a warm night, unless all signs fail," remarked Donald, with a significant nod out in the direction where they could see the distant figures of a good many riders.

"Come along with me, fellows," Adrian said just then.

"Where you agoing, Ad?" queried Billie, who seemed to be possessed of a sudden suspicion that the other might have some wild scheme in view such as riding out toward the rustlers, as if to brave them; "it's nigh supper time, you must remember, and then besides, I've got a skinned knee, so that riding don't appeal as much to me as it might."

"Oh! I didn't want you to jump on your cayuse, Billie," laughed the other; "but as it promises to be a pretty lively night for us, I thought we'd only be wise if we walked around the corrals again, so's to get the lay of the ground in our heads. A little knowledge like that comes in handy when you want to move around after dark sets in; and if you look above you'll see the clouds are gathering, which I

take it means we're going to have little light to work by from up there."

"Reckon now I might toddle along after you fellows," Billie admitted; "leastways I'll do the best I can. Didn't tell you how I come by that same bruised knee, did I? Well, it's a joke—that is, seems like one to me now, but at the time let me say I was the worst scared fellow you ever knew."

"Suppose you tell us about it?" proposed Adrian.

"Yes, strike up right away," added the other chum.

Of course after that Billie could have no excuse for holding back the harrowing details. To tell the truth he was just wild to relate the adventure; and as he chanced to be a pretty good talker, as has been said before, he made the most out of the material he had in hand.

Both the others laughed heartily when they heard how shrewd old Uncle Fred made a stalking horse out of their stout chum.

"It's a lucky thing for you, I guess, Billie," ventured Adrian, "that my aunt arrived just a second or so too late to get her hands in your hair. From what I've heard about her ways of doing things first, and then asking questions afterwards, you might have had less combing to do mornings. But I'm glad Uncle got his gun, because it looks like he might find a good use for the same soon, and per-

haps try it out on some of his new brothers-in-law—or other relatives.”

“Between you and me,” added Donald, “I just think he’s itching for that time to happen along. You see, he’s borne so much this last year that the worm is ready to turn at last.”

They made a complete circuit of the cattle corrals, and saw that everything seemed secure.

“They don’t fancy being shut up one little bit,” remarked Donald, as some of the steers brushed up against the side of the pen, as though trying to test the stoutness of the enclosure.

“No,” added Adrian, “and if only one old fellow would make a dead set for the weakest place, and tear some sort of a gap, you’d soon see how fast the others’d pile after him; and before you knew it the whole herd’d be making for the pastureland again. But we’re going to keep circling around all night, and have fires burning too, Uncle Fred says; because when the cattle see the light they’ll feel easier, thinking that we’re on deck.”

“How do you reckon your uncle means us to stand guard out here?” asked Donald, as he peered through at the dense mass of long-horns herded in the big corral.

“There’s only one way we could do it,” was the reply; “which is to keep moving around, so that there’d be no chance for the enemy to sneak up and stampede the cattle.”

Presently the call to supper came, and the three boys, being hungry, hastened to the mess room, where, at the long table, they found an abundance of "chuck," as the punchers denominate their food.

Billie actually forgot to limp, in his hurry to keep up with his chums, so that he might not be left out when it came to securing a seat; because he was always ready to do justice to such a spread as Charley Moo placed before the crowd.

Fortunately Mrs. Fred did not see fit to make her appearance, so that the meal passed off without any unpleasantness. The five suspects seemed to be on their best behavior, as though they rather fancied they would get in trouble if they attempted to be in any way domineering in their manner toward the others.

By the time the supper was over night had fallen, and it was dark indeed when Adrian and Donald walked out to find Mr. Comstock, in order to learn whether anything new had taken place meanwhile.

They found him pacing up and down near the big corral, and acting as though he had a heavy weight on his shoulders; as indeed was the case, for as yet it was an open question whether those who intended to defend the stock would be able to prevent the bold rustlers from running away with a large portion of the cattle.

"No signs of Frank Bowker turning up yet, I suppose, Uncle Fred?" Adrian asked, as they joined

the little man with the white head of hair and the soldierly ways.

"Sorry to say not, son," came the answer; "but then I'm not so much surprised at that, because I told Frank to stand by, and give the new sheriff all the assistance in his power when he started to gathering his posse. So chances are, we wouldn't be apt to see the boy till the whole bunch came along."

"I wish they'd hurry, then," Adrian continued.

"Same here," added Donald; "because, the way things look we'll prove too few to do the right thing about watching these corrals. If all the punchers could be depended on it'd be different, you see."

"Yes, you're right there, Donald," Adrian said; "for it would give us five more men. As it is now we are not only short that number, but they are apt to try and join the rustler bunch when they come along."

"Too bad," the Arizona ranch boy remarked. "If you'd only known how things lay up here you could have picked up a dozen reliable punchers, and brought the same along with us. But let's hope that before there's any real damage done that sheriff'll show up, and prove it to be of the right calibre to handle the situation."

"Amen to that, son!" added Uncle Fred, heartily.

"I wonder where Billie can be?" Adrian remarked some time later, as he suddenly remembered that he had not seen anything of the stout chum

since they left the mess hall, with Billie sending along his platter for a *fourth* helping of stew.

"Foundered, I reckon," chuckled Donald; "after those three big helps, the nerve of him asking Charley Moo for more. But the Chink seemed to feel that it was a compliment on his cooking to have any one gobble that way; and he was grinning all over as he hurried off to get a fresh supply. I believe he'd even hand over his own ration, because he has taken such a great fancy for our chum."

"Well, Billie is a great one for making friends wherever he goes!" remarked Adrian, warmly.

"Listen, what was that sound like a hiss just then? You don't think for a minute it could be any sort of snake, do you, Ad?"

"There it goes again; and as sure as you live I believe some one's trying to attract our attention back here in the gloom away from the fires. Looks like our chum Billie, too; yes, that's who it is, Donald."

"But whatever can he want with us; and why should he act in that queer way, as if he was afraid to come boldly up here, and talk with us?" the other said.

"Best way to find that out is for one or both of us to step out there, and interview him," suggested Adrian; and acting on this hint both of them walked away from the glow of the fire near which they had been standing, heading toward the spot where the bulky figure of Billie could be dimly seen, making his mysterious motions.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TREACHERY.

"Now, what's this all mean, Billie?" demanded Adrian, when they had joined the fat chum, where the shadows were dense enough to fairly conceal them from the view of any keen eyes nearer the fires.

"Yes," added Donald, "you've gone and coaxed us over here, and now I hope it isn't just to tell us you've got a pain, after stowing all that stuff away."

"Oh! you needn't ever bother about *me* getting a bad feeling after I've had my little share of rations," Billie replied, sweetly; "but then, this don't have anything to do with eating. But all the same it's a thriller."

"Well, speak up, and let us know what's doing," Adrian said.

"I was wondering whether Charley Moo could spare me just a teenty little more of that delicious stew, when he came and bent down to whisper something in my ear, while pretending to be taking my dish. And what do you think he said, fellows? Only that one of that bad bunch of punchers had been called in to talk things over with Mrs. Fred;

and that if I wanted to hear something of what they said Charley knew of a way it might be done, providing I could crawl like a snake."

"This sounds real interesting, Billie," remarked Donald.

"And of course you said you could crawl better than any snake that ever lived," added the other chum, desirous of hurrying things up; for it always took Billie an everlastingly long time to tell a story.

"Well, I told him to show me the way, and I'd do the rest," Billie went on to explain. "So he led me out of the mess room, and along a passage that seemed to take us into the ranch house. Then he explained in his heathen way that fortunately I was able to understand, how, by lying down flat, and hunching myself along, I could get to where there was only a thin partition, and even this had a knot-hole in the same through which sounds would ooze."

"The cunning Celestial knew all about that, did he?" remarked Adrian. "Chances are Uncle Fred had him hired to watch his wife, and notify him if she seemed to be plotting with any of the punchers who sided with her. But what else happened, Billie? You did the grand crawling act all right, I reckon?"

"Well, I guess, yes," chuckled the fat chum. "I managed to get close up to that same partition, and sure enough there *was* a little blot of light coming through the knothole Charley said was there. And while I couldn't look through, because it was so low

down near the floor I wasn't able to crowd down that far, I could get my ear close to the opening, and was able to hear the talk that was going on in the other room."

"And one of those five unfriendly punchers was in there, was he, conferring with Aunt Josie, when he ought to have taken his orders only from Uncle Fred?" Adrian went on to say.

"He seemed to be the boss of the outfit of mean skunks," Billie admitted; "and from the way he talked about your uncle I don't think he's got much respect for him any longer. But the first thing I heard was her asking what he'd done about sending word to her brother, which I take it means that old rascal, Hatch Walker, the head of the rustler gang."

"He's the man, Billie; and what reply did he make to that?" asked Adrian.

"Why, he says as how he'd taken care of that job; because there was already one of his boys on his pony and riding straight for where the rustlers showed up before it got too dark to see 'em. And as he had given the fellow the signal he reckoned that he'd get among the bunch right soon."

"And what message did this puncher say he had sent out to our enemies?" Donald inquired.

"Just this—that along somewhere about midnight, when the chance opened wide up, the fellows left behind meant to bust open the fence of the big corral, and let the heft of the long-horns loose.

They'd depend on their cronies to round 'em up, and make off with the lot."

Adrian muttered something to himself, that might have been a threat as to what he would feel tempted to do should he have the opportunity later on to use his repeating rifle on some of these bold cattle thieves. As for Donald, he gave a low but significant whistle to indicate his feelings.

"That sort of tickled the lady, didn't it, Billie?" he asked.

"I think it must have," was the ready reply; "because I heard her laughing, and let me tell you, boys, it made a cold chill chase up and down my spinal column to hear the way she laughed. My stars! but she's a bad one; and I'm sorry Uncle Fred just has to put up with her the rest of his natural life, because she's his wife, he says, and the law compels him to support her."

"Well, go on, and tell us a lot more, Billie?" urged Donald.

"Wisht I could," replied the fat chum, "but I've about got to the end of my string, you see, and'll have to halt, 'less you'd like me to make a lot up."

"Never mind trying that, Billie," said Adrian, quickly.

"I should say not," added Donald; "you know how to keep everlastingly at it now; when you're just telling real hard facts; and if you ever started to inventing things, I can see our finish right away."

I suppose, then, the puncher went away after he told her about the messenger he'd sent to the Walker crowd?"

"Yes, that's what he did," Billie admitted.

"It's just on a line with what Uncle Fred expected they'd try," suggested Adrian.

"Wonder if anything could be done to stop that game?" Donald ventured.

"We'll ask Uncle Fred," the other active chum went on to say. "P'raps, now, he'll think up a plan."

"Huh! why not round the whole bad lot up, and make 'em prisoners?" suggested Billie, boldly enough.

"That wouldn't be a bad scheme," admitted Adrian; "and I'm going to propose the same to him right away, when I tell him about this messenger who's gone off. Even if nothing else came of it, we'd really be reducing the number of our enemies by four, and that'd count for something in the long run."

"As for me," Donald declared, vehemently, "I can stand three open enemies to one who hides in the dark, or pretends to be a friend, only to stick a knife in your back when you're not looking. Yes, I'm in favor of taking these fellows, one by one, and making them prisoners. We might put them in the bunk house, and have Charley Moo guard them.

I rather think that moon-eyed cook can handle a gun, if one is put in his hand."

"I should think he could," mused Billie; "and if he's half as good a hand with shooting-irons as he is with pot and kettle and frying-pan, you'll find him a real wonder; because, of all the stews I ever tackled that one we had at supper took the cake."

Once started on his favorite topic Billie would possibly have rambled on at a great rate; but chancing to look around just then he found that he was wasting his breath on empty space, because Adrian had tapped Donald on the shoulder; and the two had slipped silently away, leaving the other to talk to himself.

They found Mr. Comstock moving about briskly, as though determined that there should not be a screw loose in the plan of campaign if it depended on eternal vigilance on his part.

Of course Adrian felt it his duty to tell him all about Billie's latest adventure, and Uncle Fred expressed himself as filled with admiration in connection with the splendid work accomplished by the stout chum.

"He's a dandy, that Billie is!" he went on to say, energetically; "and you'd never think it, to look at his build. Why, he made the neatest getaway awhile back that I ever set eyes on. Yes, I know all about that little knot-hole in the board partition. It really looks into my office, you see, and on several occa-

sions I've hired Charley Moo to listen there when Mrs. Comstock had sent for one of the men to report to her; because I knew it must be something in connection with another raid on the stock."

"Now," Adrian went on to say, when the other paused, "we've been talking it over, and both Donald and myself agreed with an idea Billie happened to put out as a feeler."

"As to what?" demanded the ex-manager of the ranch, eagerly.

"Here are four punchers around," continued the boy, steadily, "who not only don't mean to stand up with us and be counted, when trouble heads this way; but they're only looking for a chance to do us a bad turn. Now, we thought that it'd be a good thing if the whole four suspects could be tied, neck and heels, and kept prisoners until the sheriff comes."

Mr. Comstock rubbed his hands together as though pleased with the idea.

"That hits pretty close to the bull's-eye, let me tell you, son," he observed. "I say it's a good thing, and we'll carry it out; that is, unless the sneaky coyotes get wind of our intentions, and slope meanwhile. If they do clear out why it's a good riddance of bad rubbish, and we'll shake hands on seeing the last of the lot. I wouldn't cry my eyes out, and that's a fact, if some other person, who shall be nameless, took a similar notion to desert my bed and board, and go back to her own

kith and kin. Fact is, I'd be ready to sing hallelujah, and dance a hornpipe. But that'd be too good luck for me, I'm afraid. I was done, good and hard, but the law spliced us, and I have too great a respect for law to try and break the bonds through the courts—though running away is a different thing."

The boys were shaking with silent laughter to hear the fierce little man going on in this manner. Like a good many other men he could be very bold when out of sight and hearing of his spouse; but let her once call his name, and the spirit seemed to be taken out of him.

It was now more than an hour after dark, and still they had seen and heard nothing to indicate that there were enemies near by, bent on some daring scheme whereby the coveted stock might be stampeded, and then picked up far away on the open prairie, have the brands quickly changed, and find lodgment in the corrals of the several Walker ranches.

The two boys took their turns at patrolling the corrals. Later on they expected to hear from Mr. Comstock again, when perhaps he had formulated his plans for the arrest of the suspects, providing they had not taken French leave by then.

It was while they were at the further end of the big enclosure that Donald called the attention of his chum to a suspicious light that seemed to have

sprung up over the field where the several hay stacks were scattered about.

"What d'ye think that can mean, Ad?" he asked, in an anxious tone.

"It's none of our men, I'm dead sure," replied the other, quickly; "tell you what, Donald, it looks to me as though one of the suspects is going to fire that stack of hay! Yes, there it goes, and nothing can save that pile now!"

CHAPTER XXV.

ADRIAN MAKES A STAND.

As the hay flamed up like magic there arose a great commotion. Men could be heard shouting to one another. Fortunately Mr. Comstock was equal to the occasion. He hurried this way and that, calling at the top of his voice; and for a small man he certainly had astonishingly loud vocal attainments.

"Stay where you are, every man I stationed by the corral! This is a trick to get you away, so they can force a gap, and let the stock out! Shoot every sneaking wolf you see trying to injure the corral! Leave the rest to me! Adrian, would you care to come with me, and see if we can get a crack at

the cowardly coyote who put a match to my haystack yonder?"

"I'd like nothing better, Uncle!" cried the boy, aroused by all these happenings, and with his mind made up that, given a chance, he, would surely do some sort of bodily injury to the treacherous hound; for of all things the boy detested, a fellow who could turn on the hand that fed him and strike his benefactor in the back, was the worst.

"Donald, you stick it out here, and perhaps you'll get your chance sooner than we may!" called the ex-manager over his shoulder, as he ran hastily away, heading so as to switch around to the other side of the burning hay; which Adrian understood to mean that he anticipated discovering the fire-maker starting operations in connection with one of the other high stacks.

Already the flames were leaping wildly upward, and beginning to roar. At least they served as a huge torch, by means of which the defenders of the corrals would be able to cover quite a fair stretch of territory with their eyes, and detect the approach of any suspicious body of raiders, upon whom they could open fire without compunction, once they were sure it could not be the sheriff's posse.

As he ran Adrian was on the lookout for any kind of slinking figure that might be discovered near the haystacks, perhaps with a flaming torch

in hand; though a simple match was really all that would be needed to start another of those conflagrations, so dry was the hay.

If he had the good luck to set eyes on such an object he believed that nothing would hold him back from sending a bullet at the incendiary; for by now the boy had become indignant at the way these Walkers were trying to rule or ruin the entire country, and would welcome a chance to let one of the brood know that he did not mean to stand their ways of doing things.

"You head toward that one on the right!" said Mr. Comstock, hastily, as the two of them paused, the better to look around, and decide on what had better be done in order to stop this work of wanton destruction.

This of course meant that they should separate; and turning sharply aside Adrian bent low, and ran toward the stack to which he had been directed.

As he did so he heard the positive report of a pistol, and actually felt the wind caused by the passage of a bullet, so close did it come to his left arm. That told him there was an enemy hiding behind the haystack to which he had been sent by his uncle; and seeing him coming with such evident hostile intent, the fellow had fired. Perhaps he had missed hitting the crouching boy because Adrian kept dodging to the right and to the left, as he had seen an old Indian-fighter do once upon

a time, when a crazy puncher had shot a comrade, and was brought to bay over his dead pony.

Then again, it might be that the man did not really want to do the boy serious injury, and was only trying to frighten him off. It was as much as a warning that the unseen enemy had his range, and the next shot would be more exacting.

Adrian did not stand there irresolute. He knew when to act, and how to go about it. The first thing he did when that shot sounded, and he knew he had been the target at which the missile had been sent, was to roll over upon the ground as though he had been hit.

Almost as soon as he landed he was pushing himself in shape so as to look over the slight knob of ground just in front of where he lay, and watch the spot from which that little puff of smoke had leaped. It was alongside the haystack to which he had been sent by Uncle Fred; and the chances seemed to be that the fellow who fired must be the one whose hand had already put a match to the blazing heap.

Thus looking, Adrian believed he saw the slightest of movements amidst the hay. This seemed to tell him that the other must be peering out again, to see whether the coast were clear, so that he could either beat a hasty retreat, or else continue his work of destroying the feed, by using which the

cattle might be kept shut up for days at a time in the enclosures.

Determined to teach him a lesson the boy pulled the trigger of his rifle, having taken a quick snap judgment on the spot where he believed the other to be hidden.

His expectations were more than realized, for instantly there was a whoop, and from behind the stack a whirling figure came in sight. It was one of the "suspects" and from the way he kept clawing at his left arm the boy guessed that his lead had found its billet all right.

He gained his feet, and with rifle ready for more work if necessary, started to hasten toward where the fellow was dancing about, shrieking with the pain of his wound, and all else forgotten.

About the same time Mr. Comstock came running up.

"Got him, did you, Adrian?" he called out, in more or less exultation; for he had been sorely badgered of late by these fellows who had the backing of Mrs. Fred, and really snapped their fingers at his authority.

"Help! Mr. Comstock, get a tourniquet on, and stop this bleeding or I'm a goner! Oh! quick, sir! Don't let me go under in this way like a dog! I was a fool to turn against you just because she blarneyed me. Save me first, and punish me afterwards!" was what the fellow called out, the pain

of his wound causing him to show actual terror, and bringing out the yellow streak in his make-up.

The stockman, seeing that the second stack had not as yet been fired, did take hold, and with a few dextrous twists of a stout handkerchief put a temporary stop to the loss of blood.

"You deserve all you've got, and more too, Burke," he said sternly; "but I'm going to give you one more chance after all this row is done with. Perhaps this may be a lesson that'll be the turning point of your life, because you used to have some good points about you. Adrian, will you stay here, keeping out of sight all that's possible, and aiming to hit every time you see any one creeping around this field?"

"What will you be doing, Uncle Fred?"

"First of all," called back Mr. Comstock, "I'll take this young fool to the bunk house, fix his arm, and then leave him under charge of Charley Moo. It reduces the snakes to three; and my next job will be to take hold of the rest of the bunch, unless they skip out on seeing what's happened to Burke here."

Adrian was satisfied with the way things seemed to be progressing. What if one stack of the precious hay had gone up in smoke, there was more than enough left for their purposes; and present necessities ruled the hour just then.

He patrolled his post, keeping out of sight as much as possible. All the while he was listening to catch any strange sounds coming from the vicinity of the corrals or the bunk house. He wondered how Mr. Comstock would come out when he started to make prisoners of the other three treacherous ones; and whether in so doing he might not come in contact with his wife, who would be apt to side with the men, and try to overthrow the authority of the ex-manager.

But Adrian believed Uncle Fred had determined to make one great fight for his manliness, and would refuse to do what his strong-minded wife said, even though she threatened him with the anger of her whole tribe of relations, those lawless Walkers of whom the entire country was ringing

Still, there did not seem to be anything unusual happening; at least Adrian, holding out there in defense of the hay, failed to hear any strange racket, such as would very likely have accompanied a trial of strength between the two parties.

He suspected that possibly the other three fellows had slunk away, fearing under the new conditions that had arisen, the mistress would be unable to defend them, should matters come to a crisis.

The boy did not delude himself with the thought that the worst must be over. Up to now they had only had to deal with the sympathizers of the Walkers, those snakes in the grass who had re-

remained in the employ of Mr. Comstock because his wife refused to countenance their discharge, and who were all the while taking secret pay from Hatch Walker, ready at any moment to betray their trust.

Between this hour and dawn there was a strong likelihood that the main body of rustlers meant to get busy, and spring all manner of surprises upon those who had the defense of Bar-S Ranch in charge.

It might seem strange that the Walkers would thus openly attack a ranch, when by such action they ran the risk of being classed as genuine outlaws, if any one could be found bold enough to complain about them to the proper authorities.

The truth of the matter was, as Adrian suspected, that in this coming of the owner of Bar-S Ranch upon the scene, these men could see an entering wedge calculated to weaken the power of Hatch's sister, and possibly start the avalanche rolling that was fated to swamp them eventually.

The energetic and fearless way in which the three boys had taken hold, followed the stampeded cattle, watched until they caught the rustlers off their guard, and then not only made them prisoners, but actually drove the stolen herd all the way home—this must have made a deep impression on Hatch Walker. He knew that extraordinary measures must be taken to stem this tide in the beginning; or

else it was bound to gather such irresistible headway that he and his followers would be swept out of sight.

By degrees Adrian concluded that the hay was no longer in such danger that he need remain there constantly to guard it. He made up his mind to have another puncher sent out to that post, preferring on his own account to be nearer the cattle, and consequently the point of most danger.

Accordingly he made his way toward the corrals, being careful to give the call that had been arranged between the defenders, so that they might not shoot one another by mistake.

Donald was glad to have him back.

"I heard about what you did," he said, as he squeezed his chum's hand. "Uncle Fred brought that wounded chap past here; and he said you did it for him."

"But what about the other three?" demanded Adrian; "Uncle Fred told me he wanted to get back here so as to make prisoners of the rest of the batch."

"Well, they seem to have disappeared," replied Donald; "nobody knows whether they scented trouble, and slipped away; or if Mrs. Comstock has hidden them in the ranch house, meaning to turn a sly trick later on; but let's hope the sheriff'll get along here before the worst happens."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A BOLD PROPOSAL.

"SUPPOSE we take a tally, and see just about how the game stands right now," suggested Donald, presently, after they had stood there for a bit listening to the various sounds of the night that was in all probability bound to mark the turning point of Bar-S Ranch's fortunes, either up or down.

The cattle were uneasy in the corrals. Plainly they objected to this summary way of taking them from the pasture-land and shutting them up between walls, even if the confines did consist for the most part of a fence-like structure.

They bellowed more or less, and roamed around, as though in hopes of finding a weak spot where they might force an exit.

But thanks to the great care of Uncle Fred, who knew steers from the ground up, not a loophole of a chance for such a thing happening had been left, unless human hands started to make the break.

As Adrian well knew, if the heavy animals had had the intelligence to form themselves into a "flying squad," such as proves so effective in football,

nothing could have kept them within those flimsy bounds; but their efforts were all along the individual line, and therefore futile.

"That isn't a bad idea," was the way Adrian answered this proposition put forward by his chum.

"In the beginning, then," continued Donald, "we knew there were five of these unreliaables in the fold, for Uncle Fred mentioned their names. We had our eyes on the bunch when driving in the herds, though they seemed to behave half-way decent, and did their share of the work at that time. Now, one we heard had been sent with a message to Hatch Walker; that left four, didn't it, Ad?"

The other laughed softly.

"Say, do you know what you make me think of, when you put it in that way?" he remarked, still chuckling.

"How should I?" demanded Donald.

"Remember the old nursery rhyme we used to have long ago about the 'nine little Injuns swingin' on a gate; one fell off, and then there were eight!'"

Donald laughed too, at hearing that.

"Yes, this is something along the same order," he declared, "only instead of beginning with ten we start with only five; and I've already cut that number down a notch. Then there was that chap you wounded out by the haystacks—Uncle Fred fixed his arm, and has got Charley Moo standing

guard over him in the bunk house, with orders to shoot him down if he even tries to cut out. You might think he'd use the big house for a prison, but—well, under the circumstances it would hardly be the safe thing to do."

"On account of my Aunt Josie, you mean, don't you, Donald?"

"Yes, to say what's on my mind, that's the stuff," replied the other. "She's in league with this riff-raff element, because her brother is Hatch Walker himself, and blood is thicker than water, they say. I reckon, now, the lady has been brought up to be in touch with rustlers and all such, so that she believes in their ways of getting other people's property without paying for the same."

"Don't be afraid to speak what's on your mind, just because she happens to be my aunt by marriage," said Adrian. "Uncle Fred as much as admits that he was played for and caught by the widow. He's been bitterly sore about it ever since; but since she's his wife he's tried to do the right thing. And if she hadn't happened to be related to the Walkers, and influenced to back up their schemes for robbing the Bar-S Ranch right along, he never would have gone back on her. Uncle Fred isn't that kind of a man, you see."

"Yes, I know," Donald went on to say, "but let's drop that subject now, and get back to where we started. Two of the hard crowd we can account

for, and they're out of the game, I reckon. That left three more. We hope they've skipped, and gone over where they belong, with the enemy; but we don't *know*, and that's where most of our danger lies, in my opinion."

"Oh!"

When Adrian uttered this one word there was considerable significance in connection with it. The fact was he realized right then and there that his chum had not commenced this counting up the disposition of the enemy without some motive back of it besides mere curiosity.

"Now, three fellows may not stand for a heap when they're facing your gun, and you've got a fair chance to pepper the same as they come on," continued Donald; "but that number of snakes in the grass, lying low, and out of sight, ready to give you a tap on the head, or a thrust in the back with a knife, can demoralize almost any garrison. You know that, Adrian, don't you?"

"I think I know now what you're getting at," remarked the other. "You're afraid that when nobody was looking those three traitors have slipped into the ranch house and are hiding there right now, waiting to be tipped off as to when they ought to attack us in the rear, while we're fully occupied with defending our front—is that your idea, Donald?"

"Well, it'd be about like the lady of the ranch to fix up a smart game like that, and spring it on us

when we weren't looking," the Arizona boy remarked.

"And you've got some sort of remedy up your sleeve, I'm sure of that," Adrian told his chum, with confidence in his voice.

"I admit it," replied Donald, immediately. "That was why I led up to this by telling how two of the five had been put out of the game, and meaning that according to my notions no army can do its best fighting till they've cleaned out any traitors in the ranks."

"And what's the answer; because I'm dead sure you've thought up a remedy, Donald?"

"One of us had ought to find out whether those three punchers are really hid away in the ranch house," came the prompt reply.

"All right! I think that's a good idea; and I'll select myself as the one to go and learn if it's so," said Adrian, as quick as a flash.

At that Donald grumbled a little.

"Now, see here, I didn't expect that you'd take me up like that," he objected. "It was my scheme, and I ought to have had a fair show of carrying it out. Even if we had to draw straws to see who'd get the longest, you shouldn't cut me off just like you thought I mightn't be equal to it, Ad."

"You know it isn't that," said his chum, laying a hand on his arm affectionately. "You're capable of doing anything that I dare attempt, Donald; but

this happens to be a case where it seems like I should be the one to go."

"How do you make that out, I want to know?" asked Donald.

"First place, it's my property that's in danger, and that ought to count for something, hadn't it? Then stop and think, haven't I been all through this ranch house hundreds of times as a boy, and oughtn't it stand to reason that I'd know it better than you would? Own up, Donald, now; ain't that the truth?"

"I s'pose I'll have to," complained the other; "only I sort of hoped you'd agree to let me go, because I thought of the scheme first. But say, why couldn't we both take hold, and push it through? There's three of the dodgers in there if there's one; and that'd make it more even."

"But we wouldn't mean to try and capture them, you see," Adrian continued; "and one could do the spying better than a pair. Besides, every man is needed out here to guard the corrals, unless we want to have the cattle let out, when chances are, we'll never get half of the same back again."

Donald had to give it up at that point.

"Oh! well," he went on to say, whimsically enough, "I reckon I'm counted out this trip; but all the same, I'm not sorry I thought up the idea. Whether you find the bunch lying low in there or not, it'll be something to know the truth. If they

ain't back of us, we'll be able to face the Walker tribe with more confidence, just because those three mule-skinners¹ can't rush us from the rear."

"Let's hunt up Uncle Fred," suggested Adrian.

"You want to tell him about it, I reckon, Ad?"

"Why, yes, he had ought to know; and p'raps now he might be able to give me a few pointers that would come in useful," the other went on to say, as they started to pass along the outside of the big corral which they were guarding.

"What if he offered to go himself; would you let him?" asked Donald, still feeling a little hurt because he had been deprived of the privilege of playing the part of spy.

"Honest now, I think I would," chuckled Adrian; "but between us there's a mighty slim chance of that happening; because, you must remember who's in the ranch house at this minute; and Uncle Fred isn't going to put himself in any position where he's likely to come suddenly face to face with his wife."

"That settles it, and you go," muttered Donald, as though realizing that what his comrade said was the truth.

They soon ran upon the ex-manager. Uncle Fred seemed to have quite forgotten the fact that he had

¹ Mule-skinner is a name given to teamsters in the West, and as they prove to be pretty hard cases and tough citizens as a rule, it is sometimes used to contemptuously refer to one who deserves terms of reproach.

been deposed from the command of the forces belonging to the cattle ranch, for he was bustling around at a great rate, giving his orders in a low but positive tone, and seeing that they were faithfully executed, too.

When he heard what Adrian proposed to do he immediately declared that it met with his approbation.

"I've been worrying some myself," he observed, "about what'd become of those three skunks, because they have sure enough disappeared like the ground had opened and swallowed the lot. And just as like as not they *are* hid in the house somewhere; and ought to be yanked out by the heels, so we could put 'em alongside Burke. I'd feel a whole heap easier in my mind if I knew we had the four of 'em tied, neck and crop, so they couldn't do us any damage unbeknown."

"Then you approve of my going in to find out, do you, Uncle Fred?" Adrian asked.

"Yes, only be very careful how you get around, son," replied the rancher. "When you make sure they're inside, come out right away, without trying to do a single thing. You press the button, and we'll do the rest. Now, p'raps I had ought to go myself, as I'm best acquainted with the inside arrangements of the house; but—er, you see, I've got my hands full as it is out here; and something might go wrong while I was away. But you understand,

don't you Adrian; so go ahead; and here's hoping you'll have the best of luck. Yes, I'm coming right away, Curly; just stay where you are a minute and I'll be with you," saying which the stockman hurried off, leaving the two boys chuckling to themselves.

"Yes," said Adrian, softly, "we know all about it, don't we, Donald?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

TRAPPED.

WHEN Adrian started out to carry through the scheme proposed by his chum, he knew what chances he was taking. If those three renegade cow-punchers were hiding in the ranch house they would be in rather a desperate frame of mind, knowing that they were in the bad graces of Mr. Comstock. Hence, they would not be apt to treat the young owner of Bar-S Ranch with any particular degree of tenderness should they chance to lay hands on Adrian.

He had figured the whole thing out, and determined just how he ought to go about entering, and exploring the house. And on the whole he made up his mind that his best chance would be to crawl through the very window which had figured so

largely in Broncho Billie's adventure, at the time he had such a narrow escape.

Once through this, and Adrian found himself in the office which Uncle Fred had used as his den. Beyond was the apartment which Mrs. Comstock called her own private property, a sort of sitting-room, through which the man of the house was compelled to pass every time he came and went; and in this way his spouse could keep "tabs" on his movements, which was doubtless her motive in making these arrangements.

All was as dark as midnight in there, though he could see a faint shaft of light under the connecting door, and knew from this that there must be a candle in the adjoining room, or else a lamp that was turned low.

He listened as well as he could, expecting that he might catch even a whisper, if the other apartment happened to be occupied. But not the faintest sound reached his eager sense of hearing.

Judging from this that there could be no one there, Adrian commenced to open the connecting door. He used the utmost care in doing this, and pushed it back an inch at a time, holding his breath with anxiety while the process was going on.

When he was finally able to take a look beyond the door he found that, as he had suspected, there was no one in the room.

His next step was to pass through and seek be-

yond for signs of those Donald imagined had taken refuge in the ranch house, probably with an understanding in connection with the mistress that they were to remain hidden until the time came to take the defenders of the stock in the rear, and create a diversion in favor of her relatives, who might be cutting the corral at the time to free the cattle.

Adrian crept along through another room.

It was a good thing that he did know the interior arrangements of that rambling building, for otherwise he might have missed his way; because it was very much cut up, and a newcomer would almost need a guide to keep from being lost.

All the while the boy was straining his hearing in hopes of catching some sound that would tell him he was getting "on a warm scent," as a trailer might say.

The bellowing of the cattle, and other noises of the night, did not penetrate in here to such an extent as they had come to his ears when he was outside; and here were also little intervals of silence, when he could listen with some hope of hearing low conversation near by.

Then again Adrian could give a pretty shrewd guess at to just about where these three deserters would be apt to be hidden by Mrs. Fred, should they really be in the place.

He drew near this part of the building with growing hopes of meeting with success. The mere fact

that as yet he had seen nothing of the lady of the ranch added to his belief that she must be in communication with the trio of punchers who really belonged to the Walker crowd, although masquerading under the colors of the Bar-S outfit.

Of course it might be that Mrs. Fred had decamped altogether, preferring to be with her brother while the question of ownership of the herds was in progress; but Adrian believed that he was a pretty good judge of character, and what he had seen in her determined face told him she was hardly the one to run away just because circumstances had temporarily blocked her despotic will.

And presently he found that this was exactly so, for he caught the sound of low voices ahead; and pushing on silently was soon able to distinguish a few words, evidently spoken by one of the punchers who were in hiding.

He listened long enough to make up his mind that they were all lying low in the store-room, where the supplies of the ranch were kept. Then a bright idea flashed into the mind of the boy, which he determined to carry out.

As he well knew, that store-room had been built with a view to its being proof against light-fingered persons, who might think to profit by the fact that on a ranch like the Bar-S an abundance of edible supplies were always kept on hand, because it was

a long way to town, and time counted for much during the busy seasons.

If Mrs. Fred were in there instructing her three followers as to what they must do in order to turn the fortunes of the affray, when the critical moment came, it looked as though fortune had indeed placed things in the hands of Adrian, so that he could turn the trick unassisted.

Thrilled with the thought he crept still closer to the partly opened strong door, and tried to make sure that he could distinguish her voice. If the woman happened to be somewhere else about the house it was folly to think of trying to make the concealed punchers prisoners by simply closing that door, and turning the key in the lock, for chances were she could open the same at her pleasure.

A minute later and he plainly heard a low voice say :

"Now stay here till I give the signal, and then remember what I told you to do. If you carry it out straight we'll throw them into confusion; and before they get their heads clear the stock will all be running loose. Understand?"

Adrian judged from this that she was giving her very last instructions; and no doubt would be coming out of the store-room in another minute. If that were the case he certainly had no time to lose. Already his groping hand had come in contact with the door; and as he continued his investigations he

discovered with a thrill of solid satisfaction that the key was in the lock!

It could hardly have been better for the successful carrying out of his plan; and as soon as he had made sure of these things he started to gently pushing the door shut.

When it came to with a little sound, he heard some one exclaim:

“What’s that?”

Then the key turned in the lock, and the boy breathed easy for the first time, because he felt that he had won out.

The door was shaken violently; then a man’s voice cried excitedly:

“It won’t give, missus; somebody’s gone and locked us in here!”

Adrian did not wait to hear any more. Of course they would kick, and rattle the door, but he chanced to know how strongly it had been built, and that the chances of their breaking out might be reckoned very small indeed.

He walked straight through the house now, and emerged by way of the front door. As he stepped on to the long piazza that ran the length of the rambling building he heard a quick exclamation:

“Hold up your hands there!” came in tense tones.

“Why, hello, Donald, you wouldn’t think of filling me full of holes, I hope?”

That brought out another exclamation, this time filled with astonishment.

"What! is it you, Adrian, and coming right out of the front door as if you didn't care a cent whether school kept or not? Whatever does this mean, tell me?"

"Oh! well, I've been all through the house," commenced the other, in what seemed to be a careless tone.

"Then the whole lot have skipped, have they?" queried Donald, in a disappointed way; as though certain air castles that he had so carefully erected were thrown down by this news.

"Well, not that I know of; and in fact I reckon they're not going to leave us in such a hurry after all; if that door only holds out, and I think it will," was the staggering way Adrian conveyed his information.

Donald was pawing for his hand the next moment, anxious to shake it furiously.

"You don't mean to tell me you've gone and made prisoners of the whole bunch?" he ejaculated, with his voice trembling in the excitement that racked him.

"Just what I was lucky enough to do!" declared the other. "Why, it was as easy as falling off a log. I just crept through from room to passage until I heard the low sound of voices, and discovered that she had taken the punchers to the store-

room, to hide them there until she gave the signal, when they were to rush out and do some sort of thing she'd fixed up, that was going to demoralize the lot of us."

"And Mrs. Fred was there with them?" demanded Donald.

"Yes, I just heard her giving the last instructions, when my fingers touched the key in the lock," Adrian told him. "After that all I had to do was to close that door and turn the key; and thinking it best to keep it, I put the same in my pocket, so that no one is likely to let them out."

"Bully for you, Adrian! You're the fellow who can do things! I never heard of such a smart trick!" said Donald.

"Oh! don't mention it," remarked the other; "why, even Billie could have turned it, if he knew as much as I did about the inside arrangements of that long house, and didn't get lost in the twisting passages leading from one part to another."

"Listen! what's that I hear right now, Adrian?"

"Sounds like somebody might be trying to kick the toes off their boots against a door, don't it?" chuckled the other. "Let 'em go it while they're young; but it'll take a heap of knocking to burst that stout door open. My dad knew what he was doing when he picked the oak out that it's made from. But who'd ever dream that I'd make such a use of it as to shut up three treacherous punchers,

as well as my own aunt by marriage, in that place."

"One thing sure, they won't die from starvation," remarked Donald, as he continued to listen to the medley of sounds that came from the interior of the building but which could not keep up long.

"Let's find Uncle Fred," suggested Adrian.

"Wonder what he'll say when he learns that you've gone and clipped the talons of his wife," remarked Donald; "and if the marks on his face stand for anything I reckon now that poor old Uncle Fred has felt those same talons more than a few times, when the lady wished to make her words more forceful."

"Yes, and how it's going to end I can't for the life of me see," added Adrian; "because she's his own wife after all, so that the only escape for him would be running away, and that would lose me my manager, which I wouldn't like a bit; but perhaps it may all come out right in the end; you never can tell, Donald."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COUNTING THE MINUTES.

"THAT clears the situation a heap, let me tell you, Adrian!" was what Uncle Fred said, heartily, after he had been told what a clever trick the young owner of the Bar-S Ranch had succeeded in turning.

Donald took especial pains to note that Mr. Comstock did not appear to be annoyed in the slightest because the wife of his bosom had been thus made a prisoner in her own house; in fact, the prairie boy was inclined to believe that Adrian's relative seemed to breathe easier than he had done for some time, because now he could be absolutely certain that Mrs. Fred was so placed that she might not confront him unexpectedly, to confound him, when he ought to be fixing his mind on other things than family differences of opinion.

"The corrals are all secure so far, are they, Uncle?" asked the boy, anxiously; for he had become deeply interested in this strange game which was being waged for the possession of his herds.

"Yes, up to now nothing has happened," came

the reply; "but what lies ahead of us no man can say. They're a wily and unscrupulous lot, those Walkers, and wouldn't hesitate at anything short of murder, I reckon, and even that crime might be laid at their door, if you cared to go back to certain unexplained things that've happened around these diggings in times past."

"It's too bad the moon is hidden by the clouds, so that the darkness is likely to keep right along," Donald remarked, as he cast a critical eye upward toward the gloomy heavens; and as boys on the plains learn early in life to read the signs of the weather almost as well as the Indians can themselves, Donald knew what he was talking about when he regretfully admitted that there was little hope of the sky clearing in time to do them any good.

"Yes, because we can never say what lies hidden right out yonder," Mr. Comstock went on to observe, sweeping his hand off toward the blackness. "Somewhere in the midst of that pall we believe there are a dozen riders hanging out, waiting to swoop down on us at a certain time, and cut the barricade that holds the cattle safe, if they can manage it. That may mean the exchange of dozens of shots; and some people are apt to get their summons this very night; but what does Hatch Walker care for that, when he's made up his mind to do a thing? I'd be a happy man if only some

of us could get him to with a bullet. It'd be the best thing that ever happened for this section of country if Hatch was put out of the running for keeps. And remember, I'm not a blood-thirsty man at all, but one who would have peace all the time, even if I had to fight for it."

"But Uncle, don't you think it queer that sheriff doesn't show up, when he must know he's wanted right here and now so much?" Adrian asked, presently.

"Well, I am beginning to think it kind of strange," admitted the rancher, in a thoughtful way. "For a while I rather expected that he was delayed on account of some trouble he might be having, collecting the right sort of a posse; because I warned Frank not to let him take a single man that he suspected of feeling the least bit toward the Walkers. But by now it seems like he had ought to have got a bunch of gun-fighters together, and be along here, if he's going to come at all."

"Perhaps the new sheriff has a case of cold feet right in the start!" suggested Adrian.

"Yes, that's what I'm afraid of," added Donald; "because I've known such things to happen away down in Arizona. When this man hears how his very first call is a summons to come and hit up against the Walker tribe, he may find that he's got some mighty important business at the other end of

the county; or that his wife is sick, and has wired for him to come right home."

"No," declared Mr. Comstock, "from all I've heard about this man he's the right sort. We had the time of our lives electing him; and everybody's been on tiptoe with excitement waiting to see how he panned out. This business right here is going to make or break Jo Davies; and it's also bound to see the beginning of the end of either the Walker bunch, or cattle raising in this same county; because nobody is going to take all the chances, and then have their stock rustled."

"Watch out there, Uncle; for I believe I saw some sort of a light flash up, and then disappear again," Adrian said hurriedly, pointing as he spoke; for the fires were still burning, and they could see fairly well around the corrals.

"Yes, I saw the same several times," admitted Mr. Comstock. "I reckoned that the rustlers might be passing certain signals along; because one time it came out yonder to the east, and again it flashed up due southwest. Those lights mean something; but of course we don't know what, because we haven't got the key."

"What a long night this is going to be to us," Adrian went on to remark, as he stood and watched to see if there was any answering flash out there on the prairie where everything was shrouded in darkness.

"Sometimes I even wish they'd hurry up and do what they're planning," pursued the old stockman, grimly. "I don't like to be kept in suspense. If the worst comes along you know what you're up against; but now we keep on waiting, and with every nerve strained as the minutes crawl along into hours; and as you say, son, seems like the night would last forever. If it's going to be fight, why, let's get it over with, and then take stock of damages; but I do sure hope Hatch will be in the thick of it, and get his."

And Adrian, knowing how his uncle must have been badgered during the last year and more with the knowledge that his hands were tied, because of his wife's siding with her greedy relatives in their forays, could not find it in his heart to blame Uncle Fred for this wish, even though it could not be classed as pious.

Yes, there would be no peace in that section until the chief offender was either put behind prison bars, chased into another county, or else "planted" under the prairie sod.

It was now not far from being eleven o'clock. Adrian found this out by consulting his little nickel time-piece. And supposing that the rustlers were planning to make their attack about the middle of the night, it would not be long delayed.

"If only they knew that we had taken their four allies prisoners, and that they need not expect help

from any one inside our lines, it might make some difference," he went on to say.

"Yes," added Mr. Comstock, "because it goes without saying that they expect help from the rear. When they give the signal they look to these fellows to create a diversion, either by firing the balance of the hay, or in some other way; and while we're kept busy with them, the corrals will be slashed wide open, and the stock run out. As it is, we'll be in condition to pay full attention to the rustlers who come in from the front, so that they're due for a surprise. That pleases me; and it's all due to your caging that lot of plotters in the house, son."

The scene was a remarkable one, with the fires burning, and the cattle keeping up an almost incessant bellowing, just as though they knew that unusual events were transpiring, and the fact excited them almost as much as though they were in the midst of stampede, such as the three Broncho Rider Boys had witnessed when having their first introduction to the Walker method of building up a cattle ranch at small expense.

Each defender of the corrals had been urged to pick out some place where at the first sign of trouble he could find shelter, and which would allow him to cover a certain stretch of territory, so that he could use his gun on any rustler who had the boldness to show himself in the firelight.

The greatest danger that Mr. Comstock anticipated, was the fact that should they find themselves cornered, it would be impossible to keep adding fuel to the fires, so that gradually darkness might come upon the scene, under cover of which the corral cutters could get to work, and sever the barbed wire; as well as tear down the heavy poles that were placed to show the cattle the barrier and allow them to keep clear of the cruel points that would tear the flesh.

The stockman had endeavored to provide against this emergency the best he could. If other things failed perhaps those clouds that covered the heavens might break, so as to allow the moon to shine, and thus afford them all the light they needed.

"We'd feel some better, I think," remarked Donald, as the ranchman fell silent, doubtless thinking of the many things he knew of that were calculated to give him anxiety; "if only we knew that posse was galloping this way as fast as their horses could carry them."

"I should say we would," Adrian admitted; "and if it was daytime that might be learned by making use of the field glasses; but now we couldn't tell until they were right in on top of us."

"Well, we used to have a way down where I came from, that is as old as the hills," Donald went on to say. "I remember one time when I was trying it Billie up and declared that he'd read about

the same dodge in one of Cooper's Leatherstocking stories of the woods in the old times about Revolutionary days. I've got a good notion to try the thing right now."

"No harm done anyhow," argued Adrian, possibly more than half guessing to what his chum referred.

So what did the Arizona boy do but throw himself flat on his chest, and place his ear on the ground. Yes, it *was* an old idea, and one that has served its purpose many a time. If you doubt how sound travels faster and stronger along some such good conductor than through the air, the first chance you have, after a train has passed, put your ear to the rail, and you will find that you can hear the click of the wheels passing over the joints long after the train has passed from sight, and when not a sound can be caught otherwise.

After lying thus for a minute or so Donald arose again.

"Not much luck, I reckon?" remarked his chum, for Mr. Comstock had passed on.

"Well, not that you could call by that name," returned Donald; "you see, the cattle keep up such a trampling around, and making all sorts of noises that it was pretty hard to get anything else. I did think, though, I caught the whinny of a cayuse coming from out there in the black somewhere; be-

cause our hosses are all safe in the stables, you know, and the door locked in the bargain."

"Just as likely as not," remarked Adrian; "for we feel pretty sure those cattle rustlers are hanging out somewhere close by. If only we had a searchlight so's to throw it on them sudden-like, couldn't we make the lot scatter like partridges when we opened fire a few times? But if Frank would only come along, and bring that posse, it would clear the air a heap, believe me."

"It sure would; and here's hoping that same will happen before it's too late," was the way Donald expressed his sentiments.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COMING OF THE RUSTLERS.

"You don't think it'd pay for somebody to sneak out there and learn if the rustlers are really hanging around?" suggested Donald, after some time had crept on, without anything happening to change the conditions as they existed.

"No use, Donald," said the other, immediately. "There'd always be more or less risk that you'd get in a peck of trouble; and if the attack came when you were away, why, we'd miss your helping hand."

"But I'd like to go the worst kind, Adrian."

"I'm right sure you would," answered the other, quickly; "but the more you get to thinking it over the sooner you'll make up your mind that it'd never pay. When I crawled into that house it was of prime importance that we found out if those three renegades were hiding there, waiting to attack us from the rear when we had our hands full of other business. That was an important thing; but we already feel dead certain that the Walkers are hanging out yonder, so what good could it do to just crawl up and find this out? Perhaps, now, you're thinking of corralling the whole bunch, and beating my little game five times over, eh, Donald?"

"I give it up, Ad; so don't speak of it again, please. Just as you say, we feel they're waiting out there, hidden by that measly gloom; and I couldn't really do any more than make sure of that. Forget it. I'm wondering what their dodge'll be when they get busy. I've known more'n a few games being played by rustlers; but believe me, in all my life down in Arizona, where the Mexicans come across the border and steal cattle, to rush it over the line so that we can't go after 'em, I never heard of such boldness as these Walkers show. Why, they just up and tell a ranchman they are in need of about sixty fat beeves, and that his seem to fill the bill; so if he knows what's good for him he'll turn over and go to sleep again, in case he wakes up some fine

night, and hears a stampede taking place outside where his corral lies. Yes, and they get the habit, too, for they come back again and again."

"Well," said Adrian, grimly, "something's going to happen before morning to make a change in this program, even if we're left to fight it out alone. If that posse only shows up it's a dead certainty the end of the Walker trail has come."

"How long now to midnight?" queried Donald.

"You seem to have got your mind made up they've picked out that time to begin work," remarked the other, taking out his watch again.

"Because I know the breed so well; perhaps that's why," the prairie boy went on to say, positively; "they had to set some time, you see, so that the other bunch in the ranch house would know when to get busy; and somehow midnight seems to be the favored hour. Pretty close to that, ain't it, Adrian?"

"I should say yes, because it'll be here in ten minutes more, Donald."

"Well, I'm glad of that, because, to tell the truth I feel a heap like Uncle Fred said he did; and the sooner we know the worst, the better. By the way, have you seen Billie lately?"

"That reminds me I haven't; and I wonder what he's doing with himself," Adrian went on to say; for events had chased after each other so quickly

that for the time being he had forgotten all about the stout chum.

"We might take a walk around and see if he's crawled into one of the bunks over at the men's quarters; because you know, Billie's failing next to stuffing at dinner time is trying to 'make up for lost sleep,' as he calls it, though where he ever dropped any beats me. But as it's so near the time we look for trouble we'd better let things go as they are. If there's any shooting he's bound to be waked up by Charley Moo, who, you remember, is in there guarding the wounded fellow."

"That's right," replied Adrian, who often found this thing of looking after the fat chum rather wearisome, and fancied Billie ought to be left more frequently to take care of himself; since of late he had shown such marked improvement that he must be considering it quite unnecessary to have one of his chums forever holding out a helping hand, when they came to a muddle of any sort.

"Everything seems quiet over at the house where you left your prisoners," Donald next remarked, as he turned his head in that direction.

"Oh! not much danger of their breaking out through *that* door," Adrian assured him. "Once or twice I've wondered whether the woman in her blind rage would think to set fire to the place; hoping that she might get out in that way; but

those punchers would put a stop to any risky game like that, I should think."

"They would if they had their right sense," averred Donald; "because the chances are three to one that instead of getting free they'd all be smothered there in that store-room."

"Shall we make our stand here, and together?" asked the other, fingering his repeating gun as though under the conviction that he must speedily have use for the same.

"That was the program, as I understood it," replied Donald; "we've got the choice place, too, where we can command a wide sweep; and when I picked it out I was pretty sure the attack would swing down from out yonder, though you never can tell where lightning'll strike."

"Then let's get down behind all this trash, and lie low," suggested Adrian; "for if they come riding along, they'll be apt to send some lead singing in this direction, you can be sure."

As they had before this time arranged certain nesting places in the midst of the old lumber and such things, thrown into a great heap until it could be taken away at some future date, all the boys had to do now was to snuggle down.

Then, resting their guns over the top of the barricade, they awaited developments, still confident that they would soon have plenty of excitement on their

hands to satisfy any desire for action that might exist in their venturesome young hearts.

So the minutes dragged along, and at last Adrian announced that the hour of midnight had really arrived.

"They may come crawling up like snakes in the grass," he said; "and again, p'raps they'll go galloping past like the Indians used to do, down your way, when they had a caravan stalled—hiding behind their horses, and banging away with their guns to beat the band."

"Well," said Donald, firmly, "I hate to hurt a poor horse the worst kind, as you know right well, Adrian; but if they go to trying that sort of dodge, there's only one way to break such a game up, and that's to drop their mounts so fast they'll soon get sick of it."

"And when one of us does that, perhaps the other might get a chance to send his compliments to the rustler when he goes pitching over the head of his mount?" suggested Adrian, showing that he had fallen in with his chum's idea.

"Good enough; and we'll try that same if we get the opening. Now, let's watch out, so that no crawler gets in close enough to start cutting the wire corral open. In some places it wouldn't take only a few minutes at most to slash things wide; and by the way the cattle keep moving around, chances are

they'd be pouring out through the gap before you could think five times."

Again silence fell upon the two chums. Not the slightest sound came but they listened carefully to place it, under the impression that it might have a significance far beyond its apparent nature.

"There, did you see that?" whispered Donald, suddenly.

"That light flashed up three different times, sure it did," replied the other.

"A signal different from any of the others, too," added Donald.

"And p'raps it means for them to come along; they'll be apt to whoop it up pretty lively too, mark my words; because they'll expect their pals in our camp to take notice, so they can carry out their part of the slick game. What did I tell you, Donald?"

The night was suddenly broken by a series of loud cowboy yells, such as always cause the herd to take notice and show immediate signs of being ready to stampede. Then came the pounding of horses' hoofs on the prairie, and the two Broncho Rider Boys, crouching there, waited to get their first glimpse of the coming rustlers.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN THE SHERIFF CAME—CONCLUSION.

QUICKLY following these shouts the two boys could see moving figures, that presently developed into galloping horses. They seemed to be riderless until one looked more closely, when possibly a knee might be discovered above the saddle, or it might be an arm was disclosed.

Every fellow kept shouting at the top of his lungs, undoubtedly with a two-fold object in view; for by this means they hoped to not only excite the penned-up cattle, and work them into a fit condition for a stampede the moment an opening was provided, but at the same time such a racket was apt to alarm the defenders of the corrals, as well as bring their confederates into the game.

As they started to swing back and forth, now coming closer, and anon falling more to the rear, these wild riders started shooting their revolvers at a rapid rate. If there is one thing that a cow-puncher dearly loves above all others it is an opportunity to pull the trigger of his gun in quick succession, while he is shooting up some unlucky town where they sell strong drink.

And these rustlers were of that breed to a certainty, for they kept things going at a pretty lively gait.

"Let's start in some ourselves!" cried Adrian in the ear of his chum; for they had simply crouched there, watching what was going on, as though it might be a free show organized for their especial benefit.

Donald was only waiting for this word. He dropped his head close to the butt of his rifle, and like a flash the report came. There was a horse on the ground immediately, with his rider taking a flight through the air so that he landed fully fifteen feet ahead.

"Watch and see if he gets up; if he does let him have it!" said Donald, already filled with the enthusiasm such a situation was apt to bring about.

The fellow could not have been badly hurt by his tumble, for he at once started to scramble to his feet, as though meaning to either make off, or else try and run for the shelter of the nearest corral, bent on doing certain work that had been assigned to him beforehand.

Adrian, seeing a good chance to disable him, fired so as to hit the rustler in the leg. He went down in a heap, and the last glance they cast his way they could see him hugging his injured limb as though all the fight might have been taken out of him after that disaster.

"Don't stop there!" urged Donald. "We must teach the fools a lesson. Wait till that fellow mounted on the big bay comes along again; because somehow I've got a notion it may be Hatch Walker himself on that horse. I've heard he rides a magnificent bay; and that animal sure is a dandy!"

"Look there, you're some too late!" shouted Adrian, himself full of animation.

"Yes, somebody else got ahead of me, and bowled the horse over as neat as you please. But did you notice that shot, Adrian; didn't it have a sort of familiar ring to you? If I didn't believe our chum Billie was asleep in the bunk house right now I'd be willing to say that was his rifle!"

"And you'd hit the bull's-eye plum center!" laughed the other; "because there he is right now, standing up, and swinging his hat to let us know he's in the swim. And Donald, look at that fellow lying there where he fell. It must be Hatch Walker, and he's had his neck broken by the tumble, or else is knocked senseless. Now, our game would be to play safe; don't let any of them swoop down and carry him off."

"I see what you mean," echoed the other; "if so be we could get Hatch in our power this business would stop right short. Without his guiding hand the rustlers'd throw up the job, and never have the heart to stampede another herd. There's one fellow

heading that way, and he's just got to be told to stop, or he'll find himself hurt the same way as those others!"

Donald took a quick aim and fired. This time he could see well enough to try and strike the leg that projected over the back of the galloping horse. The conditions were all against him; but he must have touched the rider enough to give him cause to change his mind about trying to carry off the stunned leader; for the fellow suddenly whirled aside and went furiously past.

"There's Billie running out to bag his game!" cried Donald, suddenly; "he may be a fool, but we've just got to back him up, Ad; so let's rush it. When they see us coming perhaps the rest'll get cold feet and skip out!"

It was a bold act, but by such tactics has many a battle been decided. Seeing the three boys starting out toward the riders who were circling around, others of the defenders of the corrals started after them.

"Listen! what's all that shouting going on?" cried Adrian, as he paused; "can the rustlers be getting reinforcements?"

"Not much, if I know what a cheer sounds like!" answered Donald; "but it must be that sheriff's posse, come up just in the nick of time. Give them an answering whoop, Adrian, Billie, and then let's capture that man who rode the bay

hoss; because unless I miss my guess that's the king pin of the lot, Hatch Walker himself!"

Billie made wonderfully fast time in trying to reach the fallen man first.

"Surrender! The game is up, Hatch Walker!" he panted, as he presented his rifle at the man, who was now beginning to move a little.

"I'm all in, so don't shoot!" called the other, feebly.

Out from the darkness dashed a body of at least a dozen bold riders; and as if they grasped the situation instantly each one seemed to pick a certain rustler, and put after him at full speed. And to the delight of the boys, the fickle moon thought best to sail out into an open space above just then, allowing the pursuit to go on with more or less success.

Sheriff Jo Davies must have picked up the right kind of a posse for his first trial of strength against the infamous Walkers, for they scattered the band to the four winds of heaven; five were brought back as prisoners, and the boys afterward learned that two had been badly wounded, so that they were carried to the ranch to be looked after for the time being.

It certainly was the chief offender, Hatch himself, whom Broncho Billie had dismounted by that lucky shot. He fell into the hands of the sheriff who was determined to do his duty; and it might

as well be said right here that Hatch and all of his men who were captured received good long sentences for rustling cattle; while the band was broken up for good, never to come together again in that county while Jo Davies carried the star of his office on his left breast.

Of course the three who were hiding in the strong room were also taken in hand, and would at least be warned never to show their faces again around that cattle section. It was the sheriff himself who took the key, and escorted the inmates of the store-room to the out-side air. They happened to arrive just when Mr. Thomas was begging Mr. Comstock to allow him the use of a horse taken from the rustlers so that he could accompany the posse back to town, in order to keep an engagement he had just thought of.

As the three renegades and the lady of the house suddenly appeared in view the ragged pilgrim tried to escape observation; but there was a shriek from Mrs. Fred, who, rushing forward, penned him in a corner; and to the wonder of all the rest clasped her arms about him, voicing her astonishment and delight:

"Why, Thomas Smeed, then you ain't dead after all, and that report was a lie! I actually believe you got it up a purpose to deceive your lawfully wedded wife, and make her believe she might be a widow. But after all I reckon I was happier

with you than I've been since I married that fightin' stockman, Fred Comstock. Course since you're alive, and there ain't been no divorce, I'm still your own wife. No use trying to get away, Thomas; you just *got* to go with me, d'ye hear? I own a little farm away down in Kansas that I bought with my savings; and there we'll go and try it all over again. So that's settled, and a good riddance I say. I likes a husband as don't fight back when a lady wants something done."

And sure enough, when she did leave Bar-S Ranch on the next morning, with a wagonload of stuff which Mr. Comstock only too gladly allowed her to take away, poor Thomas was sitting alongside on the seat, looking the most forlorn man on earth.

Of course all his actions were explained now, for as soon as he discovered that the woman who had once made life miserable for him was installed as the mistress of the ranch, his desire to take service with Mr. Comstock had oozed from the tips of his fingers; and his only thought was to escape without his identity being disclosed.

But Fate had been too much for him; and Thomas had to be resigned.

The stockman was acting like a boy, such was his delight at the way things had turned out. Once again he was free, and a bachelor, with no one to please but himself and his employer. Of course he immediately made a new contract with his

nephew; and from the way he took hold it was certain that things would boom from that hour, until the Bar-S Ranch far exceeded its most productive year.

Before the three boys left things had all been cleared up, and peace reigned in the county which had fast been becoming known as the most riotous in all Wyoming.

As Billie had many more months still ahead of him before he would be expected to return home—and he might conclude to remain in the Wild West, since it seemed to agree so well with him—it can be set down that the three Broncho Rider Boys were bound to see further adventures in company. Some day in the near future it may be our pleasing task to again introduce these tried and true chums to the reader, and chronicle some of their doings in the form of another series of stories that will vie with these present ones in interest. Until such time then we will have to say good-bye.

THE END.

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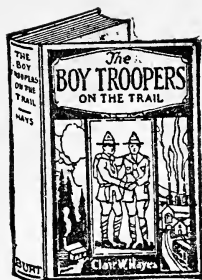
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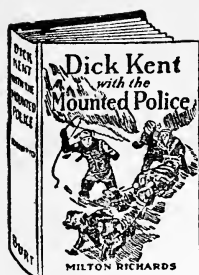
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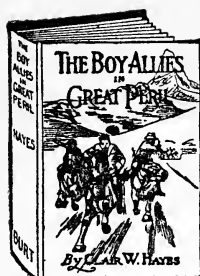
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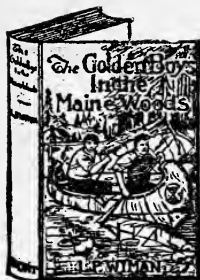
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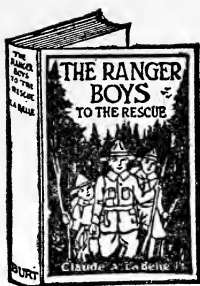
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